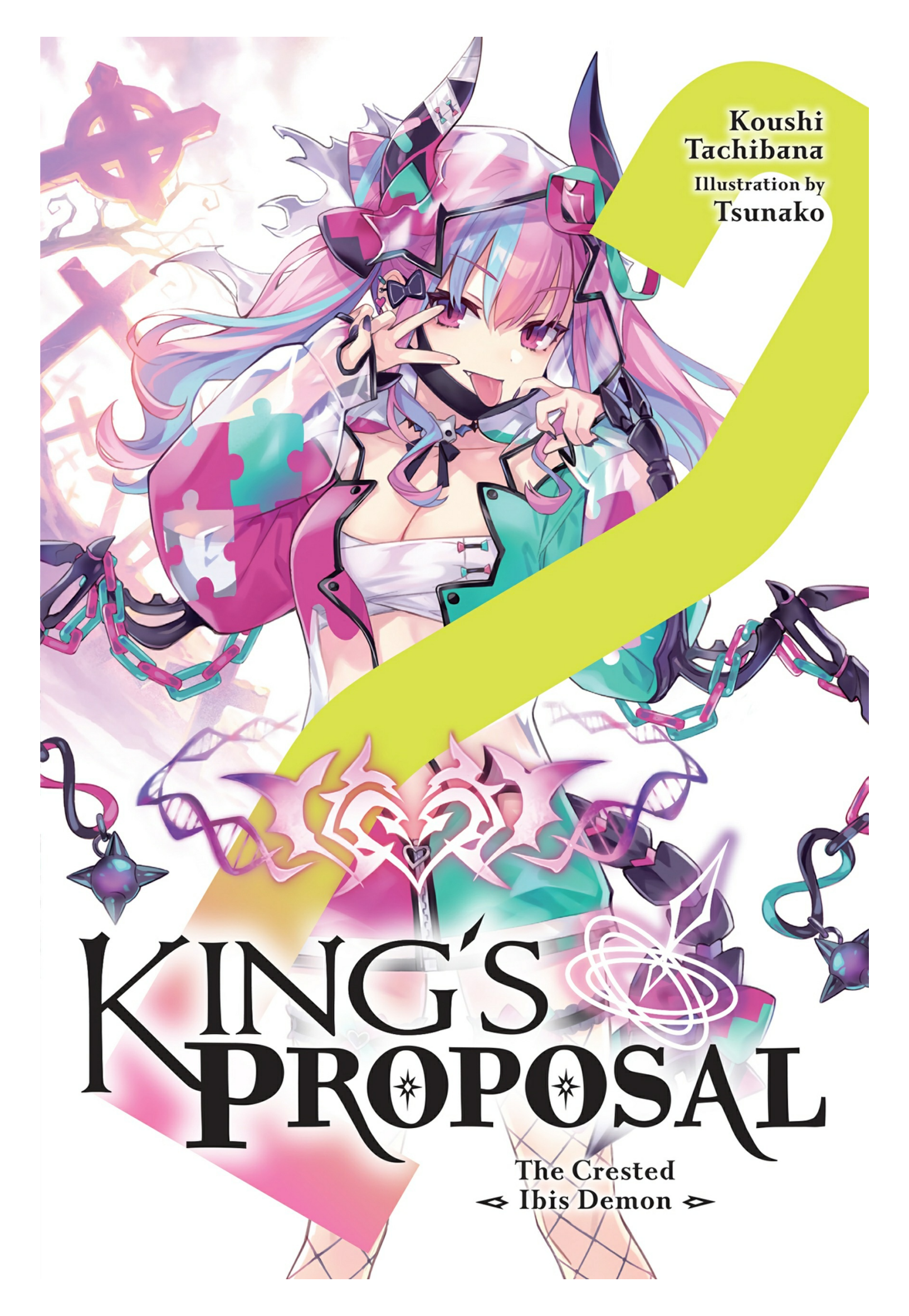






Koushi
Tachibana

Illustration by
Tsunako

KING'S PROPOSAL

The Crested
◀ Ibis Demon ▶

King's Proposal
The Crested Ibis
Demon

2

“Hey there!

And we’re back—it’s
Clara Channel Time!”





*"Oh dear...
You're a bad
boy. I'm sorry,
but I don't
have a physical
body. If I did,
I might be
able to quell
that raging bull
inside you."*

Ruri Fuyajoh

A mage at the Garden with
an obsessive adoration for
Saika and her brother Mushiki.

*"Wh-where
are you
touching
her?!"*

Silvelle

An artificial intelligence responsible
for managing Void's Garden and
overseeing security protocols.



“...What?”

Clara Tokishima

A popular live streamer on Magitube, a video-sharing website for mages.

Saika Kuozaki

The world's most powerful mage and headmistress of the mage-training institute Void's Garden.

Gyousei Shionji

Headmaster of the mage-training institute Shadow Tower.

“Madam Witch! Let's see which of us is worthy of being Mushiki's girlfriend! I challenge you to a duel!”



"...Why
don't we
set out
to build
a new
world
together?"



Prologue
Clara the Live Streamer

Chapter 1
[SHOCKING]
Becoming a Fallen Heroine

Chapter 2
[BREAKING]
I Got a Boyfriend!

Chapter 3
[SHOWDOWN]
Madam Witch vs. Clara, a
Three-Round Match for Love

Chapter 4
[MUST WATCH]
The Exhibition Match Begins!

Chapter 5
[NSFW]
Let Me Tell You Clara's
Little Secret

Chapter 6
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Afterword

“I
know
I’m a
little
weird,
but I’m
serious
about
giving
this
my all,
y’know?”

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KING'S PROPOSAL



Volume 2

The Crested
◀ Ibis Demon ▶

Koushi Tachibana

Illustration by Tsunako


NEW YORK

Copyright



Vol. 2

Koushi Tachibana

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by Tsunako

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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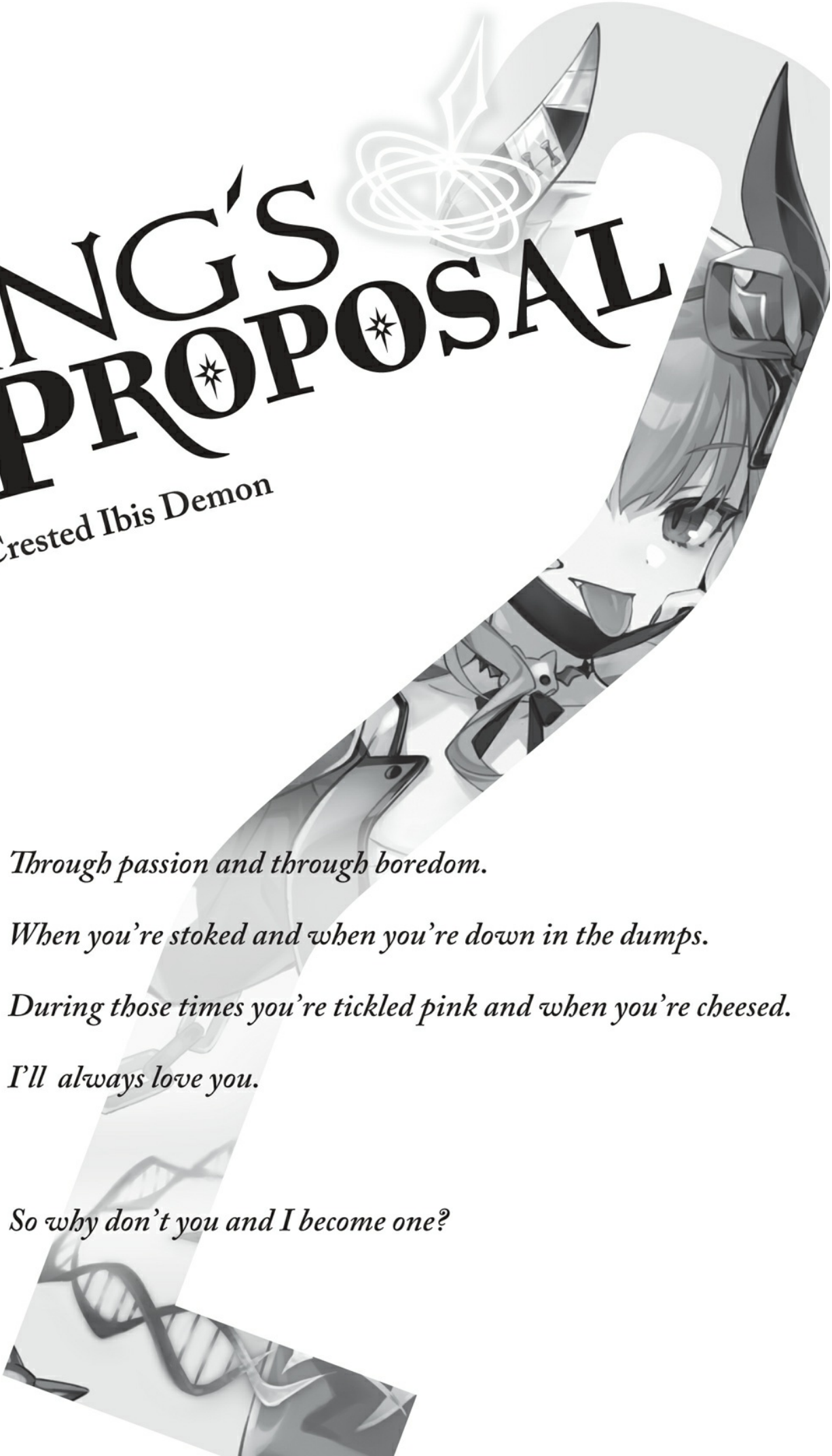
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KING'S PROPOSAL

The Crested Ibis Demon

Through passion and through boredom.

When you're stoked and when you're down in the dumps.

During those times you're tickled pink and when you're cheesed.

I'll always love you.

So why don't you and I become one?

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

◁ Clara the Live Streamer ▷

Hey there! And we're back—it's Clara Channel Time!

Are you having a *ca-razy* day, my Claramates?

So that's how it is. We're streaming at a different time than usual today. But you know how it is with your good friend Clara, don'tcha? These things are bound to happen.

And thank you for all your comments.

...Hmm? What's with all the close-ups of my face? Ah, did you notice?

Well, you know, I'm not actually wearing anything from the neck down. If you wanted a full-body pic, I'd have to blur the bits out, or I'd be banned on the spot, no questions asked.

Oh? You don't believe me?

How's this, then? Check out my shoulder! Totally bare, see?

Huh? Maybe I'm wearing a tube top?

I told you: I'm not! Fine, then. I'll go as far as I can.

...See! Any more and I'll be in trouble!

It *is* safe to show this much, right...?

Whoa, the chat's full of horn dogs today, huh?

Well, that doesn't really bother me that much. Don't make me start going on a tangent, 'kay?

So let's move on to today's topic.

Yep, my dreams for the future.

You know, as a young woman in our modern world, I think we all ought to have a goal to keep working toward.

...Hmm? You don't think I'm being serious here? You can't trust someone who's nude? Hurry up and go back to the previous match? Shut up. What's wrong with doing things this way every now and then?

This is going nowhere. Anyway, here's your good friend Clara's top three dreams for the future!

Number three! To get more subscribers for my channel!

Number two! To fall in love with a guy and become a couple!

And number one...

Chapter 1

[SHOCKING]

⚡ Becoming a Fallen Heroine ⚡

“...Kuroe. This could be the greatest crisis the Garden has ever seen.”

“What are you talking about now?”

“My reflection in the window is just too beautiful. I can’t look away.”

“That does sound like a problem. Which shall I break to solve it for you, the window or your face?”

Such was the response from the girl with dark hair and dark eyes, her tone ice-cold as she looked on with narrowed eyes and a slight head tilt.

She was Kuroe Karasuma, Mushiki’s attendant—though strictly speaking, she served the original owner of his current body.

Her words were clearly spoken in jest, but her expression, gaze, and intonation were all so harsh that they carried an eerie intensity. Mushiki felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

His remark wasn’t an attempt at humor or casual chitchat. For him, the sight staring back at him was simply irresistible.

The two of them were in the headmistress’s office on the top floor of the central school building at the mage-training institute Void’s Garden.

Mushiki was sitting behind a large desk at the far end of the room, organizing and responding to paperwork as per Kuroe’s instructions... And while carrying out those tasks, he had simply happened to glance at the window, where he had spotted his own reflection.

The glossy, lustrous, ash-blond hair that draped over his shoulders. A beautiful face with perfectly balanced features that transcended worldly terms like *the golden ratio*. In the center of that beguiling countenance, a pair of colorful eyes transfixed him with their alluring charm.

Indeed. The image in the reflection wasn't that of Mushiki Kuga, a mere high school boy, but rather a beautiful young woman—a veritable goddess made flesh.

From the moment he laid eyes on her, it was like an arrow had struck his heart. He found himself unable to divert his gaze. Yes, to use a metaphor, she was—

“Whatever it is, please snap out of it.”

Alas, interrupting his thoughts, Kuroe grabbed Mushiki by the head and, with a violent jerk, forced him to turn his attention back to the matter at hand. The silken hair swayed gently before him.

With that image having vanished from his vision, he found that he could finally move his body once more.

“Sorry,” he said with a sigh. “Thanks. The second I met those eyes in the window, it was like I froze...”

“Have you become Medusa, then?” Kuroe said in exasperation as she piled a fresh stack of documents atop the desk. “Now, let's move on to the next batch. I've already read and signed everything, but we can't send them back without first affixing a magic-based form of certification. Everyone's inherent magic has a different latent pattern, so this last step has to be performed using Saika's body.” She pointed to the space at the bottom of the page after explaining.

There, the name *Saika Kuozaki* was written in neat handwriting.

Yes. Saika Kuozaki.

The headmistress of Void's Garden and the strongest mage in the world.

The identity of the individual whom Mushiki had now become.

Around a month earlier, Mushiki had stumbled upon the dying Saika, and the two had undergone a fusion.

If it became known that the strongest mage had perished, the world would be thrown into turmoil. As such, Mushiki was now living in and attending the school as Saika herself. This paperwork was just one of his duties as the headmistress.

“Right... Um, what do you mean by *certifying* the documents?” he asked in Saika’s voice.

Kuroe continued to point to the letters at the bottom of the page. “We use a special ink with a high sensitivity to magic, so all you have to do is lightly trace the name here with your finger.”

“Hmm. Like this?”

He did as instructed and placed his thumb on the paper and slid it sideways.

With that movement, the letters let out a fleeting brilliant flash, prompting him to stare wide-eyed in shock.

“Whoa, I wasn’t expecting that. It’s beautiful.”

“Yes. Everyone tends to react with surprise the first time they see it.”

“It’s also pretty stimulating tracing the name *Saika Kuozaki* with my finger.”

“Please don’t bring your sexual proclivities into all this,” Kuroe said with a glare before retrieving the first document and then pointing to the next one underneath. “I’m afraid there are a lot of these, so please. I’ve been somewhat busy lately, so they’ve built up a little.”

“Ah, leave it to me... I’m a little surprised, though. I mean, given how organized everything is here at the Garden, I would have thought this would be done electronically or something.”

“Personally, I would like to move to digital authentication as soon as possible, as our current method is extremely inefficient... Unfortunately, there are still many traditionalist mages who place too much emphasis on old methods.”

“Sounds pretty similar to the world outside the Garden,” Mushiki said with a shrug.

“Everyone else is younger than Lady Saika, yet they’re so stuck in their ways,” she all but spat under her breath.

“Ha-ha...” Mushiki flashed her a forced smile as he certified one document after the next.

“Hmm?”

As he traced the signatures of several more documents, he felt his eyebrows begin to climb up his forehead.

Every now and then, an interesting turn of phrase kept popping up on the sheets of paper as he skimmed their contents.

“An interschool demonstration battle...? What’s that supposed to be?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kuroe answered with a nod. “A friendly match between another mage-training institute, Shadow Tower, and us.”

Mushiki was a little taken aback by that response. “You mean there are other mage schools besides the Garden?”

“Indeed. Annihilation factors appear all over the world. In Japan alone, there are five training institutes. We regularly provide opportunities like this for students to improve their skills and share ideas.”

“Hmm...”

It made sense, come to think of it. Convinced, Mushiki stroked his cheek in thought.

Only then did he notice another detail from the document in front of him.

“I thought it looked like it was coming up soon...but the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes, well. I should have submitted these documents last month, but with so many things happening lately, there were some delays... That said, these forms are just a formality. Rest assured that everything has been well prepared,” Kuroe said.

“I hope so...,” he murmured, crossing his arms.

Since she didn’t know what to make of his reaction, Kuroe’s expression remained emotionless. “There’s no need to worry. Only the five students selected as representatives will be required to fight. Seeing how you’ve just

transferred to the school, Mushiki, it's highly unlikely that you will be chosen."

"No, I mean, I'm not really worried about that. It's just..."

He fell silent. One face in particular flashed through his mind at the word *representatives*.

"Will Ruri be one of them, perhaps?"

"Without a doubt. It wouldn't make sense if Knight Fuyajoh wasn't selected as one of the five students." Kuroe nodded.

"Right..." He exhaled, struck with admiration for his younger sister.

Though still a student herself, Ruri Fuyajoh was counted among the strongest Knights of the Garden. As her brother, Mushiki was filled with pride—and overjoyed to hear how highly regarded she was here.

But after pondering this for a moment, he shook his head slightly. "Huh? From the way you're talking, it sounds like the five students haven't been chosen yet, though."

"That is correct. The Garden's administrative AI will select five students to represent us just before the start of the match."

"That sounds pretty sudden. I guess they wouldn't have much time to prepare or practice, then, would they?"

"One doesn't always have an ideal team ready to engage an annihilation factor. A mage must be capable of adapting to the environment and the situation at hand."

"...I see."

It was certainly true that there could be no anticipating when an annihilation factor might appear, nor what the situation would be at the time. In short, theirs was a constant battlefield. It was important to be constantly ready without requiring any special preparation.

"In any event, all you have to do is attend the welcome ceremony and watch the match. Afterward, well, please just offer a few words of thanks to the participants." Kuroe paused, removing the next document. "Please continue with your work. If you keep stopping, we won't be able to get through them

all.”

“Ah, right.” Mushiki nodded, tracing the signature on the remaining documents with his finger.

How long did it all take? By the time he’d finished going through the whole pile, his thumb was starting to feel a little numb.

“Well done. Now then, I will return these to the relevant parties,” Kuroe declared.

“Ah. Thank you,” he responded, raising a hand in gratitude.

Kuroe gathered up the papers, then turned back to him. “Now, we should move on to substantiation training... Shall we start the preparations now?”

“Hmm... Yeah, okay,” he replied, tensing up slightly at the sudden change of topic.

By *substantiation training*, she meant practicing how to use his magic techniques.

And by *preparation*, she meant *stimulating* him to ready his body for training, to disturb his mental state and increase the flow of his magical energy.

In other words, she was as good as saying she would make full use of her sensual wiles to seduce him.

And so Kuroe approached him with slow steps.

“...”

Her softly swaying hair, her obsidian eyes, her cherry-red lips all drew closer. He hadn’t paid them much attention before, but each and every aspect of her body now sent a powerful thrill through his brain.

“Kuroe, what are you—?”

“Don’t move, please.”

As she spoke, she placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned in.

“Ah...”

What in the world was she about to do to him? Dizzying fantasies swirled

inside his head, and he suddenly found himself short of breath.

She positioned her lips close to his ear and whispered in the most bewitching manner imaginable:

“Now, *Mushiki*. We’re going to have some exciting training time. Why don’t I give you a rousing squeeze?”

Her countenance, until a moment ago cool and collected, now betrayed an amused smile. Outwardly, her appearance hadn’t changed in the slightest, but it was as if she had somehow become a completely different person.

“...!”

No sooner did he hear that than he felt an electric current course through his brain, his chest tightening and his whole body heating up.

Then a vague glow enveloped his body—as it transformed into an entirely different figure.

A few moments later, a young man was sitting atop the oversize chair in the headmistress’s office.

His hair was pale in hue, his face androgynous. Even his navy-blue uniform had adjusted to suit his more masculine body.

Yes. Saika Kuozaki had just transformed into Mushiki Kuga.

...One month earlier, Mushiki had stumbled upon the dying Saika and inherited her body and powers.

This, however, didn’t mean he had lost his own original body.

Though he spent most of his time in Saika’s form, his own still dwelled within it, and when he was strongly stimulated or aroused, those sensations would trigger an immediate change into his original form.

“Maybe that was a little much?” Kuroe said, squinting as she looked him over.

Her expression and tone had returned to its cool, detached manner from before.

Mushiki could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks as he pursed his lips. “That’s bound to happen, what with Saika herself whispering in my ear.”

Indeed. In truth, there was no human by the name of Kuroe Karasuma in this world.

The young woman before him was an artificial vessel that Saika Kuozaki had prepared as a refuge for her soul should she find herself caught in an emergency.

In other words, Mushiki was presently occupying Saika's body, while Saika was presently in Kuroe's. Simply put, this was indeed a messy situation.

"...Could you warn me the next time you do that? I've got to prepare, too."

"Prepare your heart, you mean?"

"Recording equipment."

"You never change," she retorted, fixing him with a hard glare. "But let's move on. Time is short. We'll begin your training at once... The two bodies—yours, Mushiki, and Lady Saika's—are two sides of the same coin. If you die, so, too, does Lady Saika's body. To prevent that from happening, we need to ensure that you are at least strong enough to fight."

"Yeah, I get all that... By the way..."

"What now?"

"You aren't going to talk like Saika anymore...?" he asked sadly.

Kuroe let out a small sigh. "Just like the truth about your body, we cannot risk *my* secret leaking out. We should refrain from such actions as much as possible."

"...I...see..."

"You're always quick to sink into depression," she exclaimed with an exasperated look as she approached the back of the headmistress's office and reached for the doorknob. "I *would* like to use the training grounds, but we would be a little too conspicuous there. The courtyard in front of Lady Saika's mansion will make a better choice."

With that, she opened the door—revealing a beautiful forecourt surrounded by magnificent flowerbeds and carefully cultivated trees.

Of course, this wasn't the top floor of the central school building. There was no way that a place like this could have existed on the other side of that wall. Rather, the door operated through a magical distortion, leading to a different place within the grounds of the Garden.

"Mushiki. This way, please."

"Yes," he answered in a simple though clear voice as he followed her through the doorway.

He found himself in front of Saika Kuozaki's private residence in the Garden's northern precinct.

There was an elaborate gate up ahead, followed by a paved path extending beyond. It was hardly designed for ease of combat, but it was more than enough for a novice mage to practice his skills.

"Now then, let's begin... Please try activating your second substantiation," Kuroe urged as she positioned herself on the paved path.

"...Right." Mushiki nodded, collecting his thoughts.

"..."

It felt like he was trying to force all the elements that composed his body together, from his feet to his gut, from his head to his chest, from his shoulders to the tips of his hands. He took stock of his whole body, focusing his strength into a single point.

"...U-ugh..."

But nothing appeared in the palm of his right hand.

"...Hmm." Kuroe exhaled at long last. "That's odd. You *have* successfully pulled off your second substantiation once before."

"...Sorry. I didn't really know what I was doing that time..."

"Hmm." She stroked her chin. "Perhaps you exerted more power than usual after falling into an extreme situation...? Well, that kind of thing does happen on occasion. Magical energy does change greatly depending on one's mental state."

She paused there, narrowing her eyes. “So long as you are in possession of Lady Saika’s body, this will pose a problem. You must learn to use your powers in a stable manner.”

“...Right,” he said meekly.

Kuroe sighed. “But if all we’re going to say is *do it*, the Garden can hardly be considered a training institute. Let’s build you up to it. Are you ready?”

“Yes! Even if it costs me my life...!” Mushiki responded fervently.

Kuroe gave a slight shrug. “I appreciate your spirit, but that won’t do, either. If you perished, Lady Saika would also die.”

“Ah... S-sorry. You know what I mean.”

“Very well. I don’t doubt your enthusiasm,” she said with a nod, before raising a finger. “As I said earlier, you have already succeeded once in activating your second substantiation. Which means that you already have everything you need to do it again.

“Do you follow, Mushiki?” she asked. “The substantiation created by your technique is, so to speak, a component of your inner self. Your first substantiation, *phenomena*, brings forth magical effects that exist within you. Your second substantiation, *matter*, establishes those effects as a tangible substance. By moving from one substantiation stage to the next, you expand the scope of your *inner self* outward. So let’s keep that image in mind as we try it again.”

“Right.” He nodded, fixing his attention on his right hand yet again.

“N-ngh...”

...But try as he might, nothing appeared in his hand.

Kuroe let out a long breath. “Well, if you could do it with just some simple words of advice, you would hardly need training. It will take steady, repetitive practice.”

“Right... Sorry.”

As though suddenly remembering something, Kuroe raised an eyebrow. “Now... Yes. This may seem somewhat childish, but let’s prepare some treats.”

“Treats...?”

“Yes. To serve as a reward. They might help motivate you a little more. How about this? If you can activate your second substantiation, I will answer one question. About anything you want.”

“Ah, I did it!”

No sooner had Kuroe finished speaking than a clear, glass-like sword materialized in Mushiki’s right hand as a two-layered crown-like world crest appeared over his head.

“...Huh?” Kuroe stared wide-eyed.

He had never seen her so taken aback before. This was a rare sight—and one that he wished he could have caught on camera, if only he’d had one on hand.

“...” She stared at him for a long moment, before folding her arms in consternation. “I have to ask. You didn’t do that on purpose, did you?”

“No way. I wouldn’t lie to you, Kuroe.”

“...Hmm. Yes, I’m sure you wouldn’t,” she said with a nod, but her expression suggested she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“By the way, Kuroe?”

“What is it?”

“Did you mean it, when you said I could ask you anything?”

“I see. So you were only thinking of your reward?” From her tone, her despair seemed to border on admiration. Then, pulling herself together, she said, “Very well. Putting aside how you achieved it, you *did* successfully activate your second substantiation... So how does it feel to hold that sense of mystery in your hands? Are you *aware* of the sword, of what it *is*?”

“What type of person does Saika like...? No, what kind of presents...? Chances like this are hard to come by; I’ve got to think carefully here...” Mushiki pondered in all earnestness.

“Listen to me, please,” Kuroe said with a deep frown.

Then, at that moment—

A soft chime came from her pocket.

“Oh...”

She must have received a message of some sort. She retrieved her phone and began to tap the screen.

“Hmm... My apologies, but something important has come up. Let’s call it a day for now.”

“Eh...?”

In spite of himself, Mushiki found himself short of breath after hearing these words—and just like that, both his second substantiation and his world crest vanished.

“Don’t make such a face. Your reward is still valid.”

His desperation must have been clear as day, as Kuroe stared back at him, aghast.

“That being said, there’s no time to waste. Please don’t neglect your self-studies.”

“Right... But what should I do...like, specifically?”

“The tablet you use in class contains a textbook on basic magic usage. Please use that as a basis for practicing some drills. As for the rest, well...” She placed her index finger on her chin as though mulling over something. “Given my position, I can’t actively recommend it, but apparently many students have been using MagiTube as a point of reference lately.”

“MagiTube?”

Mushiki tilted his head at the sound of that unfamiliar word.

Kuroe nodded. “Speaking of which, we’ve been so busy that I haven’t properly explained how to use the various applications... You do have a smartphone, don’t you?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah.”

Mushiki gave her a small nod as he pulled his phone from his bag nearby. He had received it upon enrolling as a student at the Garden, so it was a little

different from his old one.

He usually carried it in his pocket, but seeing as it could get in the way during training, he had left it in his bag.

“You should see an app called MagiTube, yes? It’s one of the applications we preinstall here at the Garden.”

“...Ah, here it is. I had no idea about any of this...”

Come to think of it, he hadn’t made use of his new phone that much over the past few weeks. The only feature that he had gotten familiar with up till now was the camera.

He tapped on the icon with a stylized letter M, and the application opened.

Beneath the MagiTube logo was a search bar and thumbnails for various videos.

“It kind of looks like a video site.”

“Precisely. MagiTube is a video-hosting site exclusively for mages.”

“...For mages?” he repeated.

Kuroe glanced down at the screen—her face coming so close that his heart raced, though he decided to keep his mouth shut.

“Yes. As you know, the existence of mages must be kept a secret from wider society. We can’t openly talk about things like magic or annihilation factors... Nevertheless, in this information-oriented world, it would be foolish of us to share only through oral means or written texts.”

She paused there, pointing down at the screen. “So we decided to create a web service that only mages can use. It isn’t particularly different from similar services you can find on the *outside*. You can upload videos containing confidential information and leave comments. Don’t worry about security. The main staff members at the company managing it are all mages, too.”

“Wow...,” Mushiki said as he scrolled down the screen with clear admiration.

The thumbnails for the videos did indeed show people using magic in flashy ways, along with monsters that could only be annihilation factors. Several

seemed to deal with topics such as the history of magic—and provided explanations and commentaries as well as guides on effective practice.

Slowly, Kuroe's words began to fall into place. These might not be official lesson materials, but it was often easier to intuitively understand something with the help of a video.

Incidentally, one video titled *I Tried to Defeat an Annihilation Factor Using Only Spell-Type Magic* caught his eye... How on earth could they have pulled that off?

"Finding what works for you through trial and error is an important step in the learning process. You should try anything that comes to mind."

"Right. I think I get it," he answered.

Kuroe gave him a firm nod. "Well, then," she said, glancing up at him. "Let's go. I'll walk with you to the central precinct."

"Ah, right."

He followed Kuroe down the path leading away from the courtyard, when she suddenly stopped as though only now remembering something.

"By the way, Mushiki," she said. "There should be an application called Connect. Did you see it?"

"Huh...? Ah, yeah. What does it do?"

"It's a social networking service that lets users exchange messages and stickers—and make phone calls. You can also talk about anything magic-related through it, too."

"Ah, I see... I'm a bit surprised, though. I thought mages would use magic to communicate or something."

"This is much more efficient than relying on a crystal ball or telepathy. Of course, those are still used for special situations, but when it comes to everyday communication, technology is the answer. You don't need to waste your magical energy to use it, after all."

"Ah, that makes sense."

Why did he feel like they'd had a similar conversation once before?

At that moment, he raised his eyebrows.

"So why did you bring up this app?"

"Let's exchange user IDs. I don't think we'll be able to be with each other as much from here on out."

"...Huh?!" Mushiki's voice cried out at this unexpected announcement.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

"No, it's just... I mean... A-are you sure?"

"We'll need to split up pretty often from now on, so it's best that we have several ways to contact each other."

"Y-yeah, right. C-can I get your details, then...?" Mushiki asked, his hand trembling as he opened the app on his phone to read the QR code on Kuroe's screen.

The device let out a high-pitched sound as the name *Kuroe Karasuma* appeared on the display, along with an ADD AS FRIEND button.

"Eeep...!"

"There's no need for any weird noises. What on earth is the matter with you?"

"No... I was just a little surprised is all. Yes, let's start off as friends and see where we go!"

"Watch what you say," Kuroe replied, her tone flat as she narrowed her eyes at Mushiki.

Overcome with emotion, he tapped the ADD AS FRIEND button.

"I—I can't believe it... Saika's details...on *my* phone..."

Before he knew it, he felt a wave of heat spread from the area around his eyes all the way down his cheeks.

"I don't have any more regrets..." he whispered, holding his phone close to his chest.

“Haven’t you set the bar a little low there?” Kuroe said with a sigh as she returned her own phone back inside her pocket.



“...”

Around ten minutes after leaving Mushiki, Kuroe was holding herself ramrod straight as she took the elevator in the Garden’s central library.

There was no one else with her, but even so, she didn’t once step out of character as Kuroe Karasuma. She understood full well that there were always blind spots in one’s awareness; carelessness and overconfidence only made one more vulnerable, allowing them to be easily taken advantage of.

Indeed, the only time she dropped the mask of *Kuroe* to become *Saika* was while in the presence of Mushiki, the one and only person who knew her true identity. At all other times, in all other places, it was necessary, she believed, to truly *be* Kuroe.

Well, she would never say this to Mushiki’s face, though—if she did, he would just end up having another one of his emotional overreactions.

At that moment, the elevator came to a stop. An electronic chime sounded out as the doors slid open.

She was on the twentieth basement floor, the lowest level of the Garden’s central library. Only those with special permission were allowed to enter—or even to know of its very existence.

This restricted space was known as the sealed area—a place where the most dangerous materials and creatures were stored for safekeeping.

Kuroe approached calmly so as not to let the hem of her skirt flutter too much and made her way down the dimly lit corridor before reaching an opening.

There, the wall, covered in magic glyphs, gave way to a heavy metal gateway. In appearance, the area was more akin to an altar for some kind of arcane ceremony, or perhaps a huge bank vault, than a room in a library.

“...Thank you for waiting, Knight Erulka,” she called out with a polite bow to the individual who had arrived ahead of her.

“Hmm?” The mage in question turned around with a puzzled look.

She was a petite girl garbed in a long white robe worn over thin leggings, and her fluffy, feline hair was tied up in a distinctive arrangement.

No matter how you looked at her, she could only have been in her early teens—certainly not old enough to be permitted inside such an important area.

But when it came to mages, one’s outer appearance told you nothing about their true age. In fact, after Saika, this girl was the second oldest individual at the Garden.

Erulka Flaera—the head of the Garden’s medical department and one of its most important knights.

“You... Kuroe, was it? I asked Saika to join me, though...?”

“Yes. Lady Saika is currently occupied with something, so she instructed me to take care of this affair on her behalf,” Kuroe answered.

She could have easily brought Mushiki with her after restoring him to his Saika form, but there were things in this sealed area that, should he learn of their existence, would cause him unnecessary psychological harm. As she didn’t know why Erulka had asked her to come down here, it was simply too risky to get Mushiki involved.

“Hmm...” Erulka stared at her as though to size her up, before finally letting out a labored breath. “Very well. If Saika is happy to let you down here, I suppose that speaks to how she trusts you. As far as I’m concerned, I have no complaints so long as you convey my message to her.”

“I would be happy to,” Kuroe replied with a polite bow.

Erulka may have been one of the oldest and most senior mages at the Garden, but she was also adaptable enough to know how to deal with unexpected circumstances such as this. In fact, if not for that trait of hers, it would have been difficult for Saika to have maintained such a strong friendship with her over the centuries.

“In that case, Knight Erulka, what is this about?”

“Ah... If Saika asked you to come here on her behalf, I suppose it’s safe to

assume you know what this place is?”

“Yes,” Kuroe answered.

Erulka gave her a slight nod and reached out to the console set in the wall.

Several strings of letters appeared on the screen, and a feminine voice came from the speaker: *“Ye-e-es? Who is it?”*

“Erulka here. Sis, display stored item O-08.”

Despite that strange form of address, the individual on the other end of the interphone wasn’t Erulka’s actual sister. The administrator of this library was simply a little eccentric.

“Oh, Erulkie? You know Item O-08 is sealed under the highest security level, yes? It could be dangerous to view it. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okaaay!”

The voice replied cheerfully, and the letters engraved on the wall let out a dim glow. The metal door at the far end of the room slowly swung open.

“O-08...”

Kuroe, watching on, raised an eyebrow.

Of course, she knew exactly what that serial number was assigned to. Of all the items stored in this underground sealed area, it ranked among the absolute worst. Why in the world would Erulka want to take a look at it...?

“...What?”

From behind the door, a huge transparent crystal came into view—an artificially made gemstone, refined through magic, used for sealing away magical substances.

The problem lay within that crystal—a huge heart, around as tall as Erulka herself.

And it was pulsating ever so slightly.

“The heart of the Ouroboros is beating...?” Kuroe whispered, her voice

quavering.

Erulka folded her arms as she nodded. “Precisely. Annihilation Factor No. O-08: Ouroboros. One of the twelve mythic-grade annihilation factors, Mythologia, that Saika defeated a long time ago.”

Annihilation factor—a general term for an existence capable of destroying the world, phenomena that tended to occur somewhere on the Earth roughly every three hundred hours.

According to the level of threat they posed, they were categorized into calamity, war, obliteration, and illusionary grades, and mages of corresponding caliber were routinely sent to destroy them.

But over the past five hundred years, there had also been twelve confirmed annihilation factors that ranked higher even than the highest illusionary grade.

Those were known as mythic-class annihilation factors—or Mythologia.

Legendary threats that only Saika Kuozaki could hope to stop.

Sealed within that crystal was a piece of one such creature, the Ouroboros.

“...As for why the body of the Ouroboros, which Saika herself defeated, remains—the Ouroboros was an annihilation factor with the power of *immortality*,” Erulka explained, staring unwavering at the slowly beating heart.

Maybe she was being overly cautious as she wasn’t sure just how much Kuroe already knew about all this.

As such, playing along, Kuroe nodded in a display of understanding. “Yes, I’ve heard about it. The only monster that Saika’s techniques couldn’t defeat. In order to prevent its body from regenerating, it was divided into twenty-four pieces, each stored in separate locations around the world.”

“Precisely. The heart has been in a state of suspended animation for centuries. But as you can see, it’s beating again. I don’t know what triggered this, but it’s certainly not in its usual state.”

“...”

Kuroe bit her lip at Erulka’s explanation.

She could guess why this had happened.

Yes—because Saika had died.

Close to a month ago, Saika Kuozaki had been fatally wounded, her body merging with that of Mushiki Kuga, who had happened to stumble on the scene of the crime.

As such, Mushiki presently inhabited the body that possessed all of Saika's techniques, while Saika's soul had been transferred to a homunculus—an artificial body—in the form of Kuroe.

In other words, Saika Kuozaki, her mind and body, no longer existed as one entity.

It wasn't surprising that the seal that Saika had placed on this creature long ago had therefore begun to weaken.

"I understand the situation. I will immediately seek Lady Saika's instructions on how to restore the seal. At the same time, I would appreciate it if you could check the other sealed parts."

"Hmm. Understood."

"...Yes. If it awakens now, there's no way we'll be able to stop it...," Kuroe murmured under her breath, talking to herself.

Erulka, overhearing, tilted her head. "Hmm? What a strange thing to say. It may be a unique class of annihilation factor, but Saika has already beaten it once before, no?"

"...Yes, you're right. But Lady Saika hasn't been at her best lately."

Kuroe could hardly reveal the truth here, nor could she give the false impression that Saika would be able to deal with this should worse come to worst. Still worried, though, she tried to brush the comment aside.

"Oh? I see. That sounds rather serious, no...? Well, either way, we'll have to take caution while dealing with this thing."

"...Yes. That's exactly right." Kuroe nodded, trying to hide the sweat building up on her forehead.



Shortly after parting ways with Kuroe, Mushiki found himself sitting on a bench behind the central school building, carefully perusing the videos available on the streaming application MagiTube.

As Kuroe had suggested, to make effective use of the service, he first had to understand how the application worked and what was trending on it.

“Hmm...”

At first glance, the application didn’t seem much different from any other video-sharing website. The thumbnails were lined up in neat rows, complete with their titles, durations, and number of views.

For the time being, he decided to try ranking them by popularity. As he tapped through the menu, the available options appeared in a list from top to bottom.

“Hmm?”

As he glanced over the videos, he suddenly noticed something.

Apparently the first-, second-, and third-most popular videos were all by the same user.

“Clara Channel...”

It looked to be fairly popular. Glancing at the channel rankings, it was clearly number one by an overwhelming margin. Some of the videos had even surpassed a million views. Mushiki didn’t know how many mages there were in the world, but given how limited the user base had to be, that number was positively astounding.

According to Kuroe, lots of students used these kinds of videos to learn how to wield magic. The fact that they were so popular had to mean that this Clara provided easy-to-understand explanations or maybe innovative teaching methods. As such, with his hopes raised, Mushiki tapped on the top trending video.

“Hi there! And we’re back—it’s Clara Channel Time! Are you having a ca-razy day, my Claramates?”

The video started playing—showing a young woman waving playfully to the

camera.

She had a colorful appearance, wore a mask to hide her face, and had ears adorned with various earrings and ear cuffs. Her name was Clara, from which her channel took its title. She was clearly acting more than a little over-the-top throughout, speaking as though actually addressing her audience.

“I want you all to hear me out for a minute. The other day, your friend Clara saw a video on a website from the outside. You know, the kind anyone can watch. It was called I Tried Taking a Bath with Slimes. Wow, I thought—but all they did was fill a bathtub with some slime toys and then climb in and make a whole lot of noise... So I was thinking: Hold on a minute. Is this a joke? Where are the slimes?”

With that, the image on the screen cut to a different angle.

“So I went to a friend from a different year who’s studying alchemy and insisted they make some for me!”

With that, she gestured to the bathtub behind her—filled with an unmistakable *something* that was swelling and wriggling all over.

That was clearly no ordinary substance. The rippling on the water’s surface couldn’t possibly be a natural phenomenon—it was far more likely the movements of an invertebrate in search of food. Listening carefully, Mushiki could even make out what sounded like a high-pitched cry.

“Whoa... The real thing sure does have a different kind of aura, huh? If it was too strong, it would end up being a certified annihilation factor, so I asked my buddy to drop its power level a bit...”

The corners of Clara’s lips were twisted in a forced grin, sweat all but dripping down her cheeks from thrilled anxiety.

“But! Your good friend Clara isn’t scared of something like this! Whhhooooaaa! Here it comes, a real-life I Tried Taking a Bath with Slimes!” she cried out in anticipation as she dived straight into the bathtub.

With a loud thud, the gel-like substance rippled violently and spilled over the edge of the bathtub. Nonetheless, without so much as a drop of that goo spilling onto the floor, it soon retreated back inside the tub.

Then the foreign body who had just invaded its space—Clara—was soon engulfed, the substance wrapping itself around her.

“Oh...! Wha—?! Ooohhh...?!”

Clara squirmed as she let out a pained cry. Her arms and legs kept reappearing then sinking once more below the surface.

“...”

Eventually, the cries died down and silence fell.

But then—

“Gah...!”

Just as Mushiki was beginning to feel genuinely worried for her safety, she stepped out of the bathtub.

“Ha...! Ha...! Th-that was insane...! It was agony at first, but then there was a sense of profound calm... I don’t remember the Sanzu River being so slimy, though...? Anyway, there you have it! Your good friend Clara just conquered a real-life slime bath! There’s nothing to it! Just a mage’s strength of will!”

With that proud declaration, her clothes suddenly collapsed into a heap, melted to bits.

“Gyaaarrrrggghhh?! So I was almost digested in there?!” she exclaimed, her arms and legs flailing about in panic while her pale skin became increasingly exposed.

At that moment, a quick disclaimer appeared on the screen: *I used a slime that only melts clothes*. Mushiki couldn’t be entirely sure, but maybe there were certain rules that video streamers had to follow when using this mage-exclusive video-sharing site?

After that, the screen went black for a moment, before Clara, having apparently escaped from the bathtub, reappeared, breathing heavily. Most of her clothes had melted away, and she looked to have changed into a swimsuit that she had probably readied in advance.

“Ha-ha... That was a close one. If not for this anti-digestive swimsuit, I would have been mosaicked all over again! Anyway, you had better watch out if you’re

planning on taking a real-life slime bath, my Claramates! Make sure your clothes are made from the right materials! Especially down below! Seriously, if you're not careful, those things can creep in from front and back. Men, too! There's a hole in your penis, you know?! All right, that's it for today. Clara out!"

With that, the video reached its end.

"..."

Mushiki rested a hand on his forehead, his expression tinged with bewilderment.

...Yep, that certainly was a *unique* kind of video, the sort that only a mage could produce. He had never seen anything even remotely like that creature on the *outside*.

But despite having patiently sat through that video, he still hadn't learned any useful information about magic or how to use it for himself.

"Um... Er..."

"...Whhhooooaaa?!"

And then—

"...!"

A moment later, Clara's voice rang out yet again, prompting Mushiki to widen his eyes even further.

Maybe the video hadn't actually finished? And he hurriedly glanced back down at his phone, but the display was already showing the page for the next recommended clip. It *had* ended.

But he had also definitely heard her voice just then...

"Eh...?"!

At that point, he had clammed up.

But that was only to be expected.

After all, a person had suddenly come falling down from the sky.

"Uggghhh...?!"

He reached out and caught the tumbling figure in his arms.

The next moment, a heavy weight bore down on him, shooting through his shoulders all the way down to his waist.

The figure might not have been particularly large, but it was the momentum of the fall more than anything else that added to the impact.

...Well, if not for his training in the Garden's practical classes, he would have been crushed, so this wasn't really too bad.

"Owww... Another failure..."

The girl who had fallen from above blinked a few times, her eyes snapping open as she finally grasped her current situation.

"Whaaat?! Someone's carrying me in their arms?! Like a princess?! Seriously?! This kind of thing can really happen?!"

Her eyes gleaming with excitement, she swung her legs up and down.

With each of her movements, the tendons in Mushiki's arms and waist, already at their limit, screamed out.

"Stop... Um... Let me...put you down..." He groaned.

"Ah, sorry 'bout that," the girl said lightly as she dropped to the ground.

"Phew... Ah..."

The pressure on his body was gone, and his muscles, having turned unnaturally stiff, finally began to move as he fell flat on his backside.

The girl from the sky peered down at him with a worried look. "Um... Are you okay, mister?"

"A-ah... Yeah. Are you...? Are you hurt?"

"Nope! Thanks to you, I'm fine!" she answered with an exaggerated salute.

For now, at least, Mushiki could breathe a sigh of relief, simply forcing a faint smile.

"...Hmm?"

At that moment, his eyebrows shot up.

It had all happened so fast that he didn't have time to process it, but looking the girl over once more, a mysterious feeling took hold of him.

She appeared to be around the same age as him, with her flashy dyed hair tied up in two pigtails. Two slender eyes, distinctive makeup, ears full of piercings and ear cuffs. She was wearing a mask drawn over her ears, but she had pulled it down over her chin as though it would be rude to hide her face while thanking someone. Her sharp canines peeked out from between her exposed, shapely lips.

...To be honest, it was too much information to process—and that was just from the neck up. Her eyes seemed to flicker as she stared at him.

Nonetheless, it wasn't her unique appearance that had caused Mushiki's sense of discomfort.

No, it was more like déjà vu. This was without a doubt their first meeting, but he couldn't help feeling like he had met her somewhere before.

"Hmm? What's up, mister? Why're you staring like that? Have I bewitched you with my gorgeous charms?" she said with a mischievous smile.

"..."

Mushiki continued to stare back—when his eyes widened.

"...Clara?" Her name spilled from his lips unknowingly.

Yes, there could be no mistaking her. This was undoubtedly the same Clara from the MagiTube channel he had just been watching.

"Yep, I'm Clara. Looks like you've heard of me," she said in a daze.

At that moment, a fresh voice came from his smartphone, which he had left on the bench.

"Wooowww?! Th-that light is amazing! Awesome!"

As he had left the screen on for a while, his device must have automatically started playing the next recommended video—and was now showing Clara having another flashy reaction. Incidentally, the title of this next video was *I Bought a Legendary Holy Sword on a Mage Auction Site*.

The girl's eyes sparkled as she glanced at the device. "Whoa, for real?! You were watching *my* videos?! Huh?! So I fell from the sky while you were watching *me*?! Is that even possible?! This has to be fate! Maybe I've been watching too much anime?!" Her voice ecstatic, she continued to ramble on and on.

Mushiki had to agree that, statistically speaking, this was indeed a miraculous occurrence, but it wasn't quite so clear whether watching anime had anything to do with it.

"Yeah... But to fall while filming and then to have this super-rare encounter... *Inscrutable are the ways of heaven*, right?" The girl, overcome by deep emotion, gave him a forceful nod.

He didn't really understand that last part, but there was something else more important bothering him.

" 'While filming'...? What *were* you filming?"

"A little thing I'm calling *I (a Beginner) Try Parkour on the Roof of the School Building!*" She laughed.

"Talk about reckless...," Mushiki murmured sullenly.

The girl let out an amused chuckle. "Ha-ha-ha. Well, I figured a healing mage would help me out if I got hurt. Besides, *thrilling* videos are all the rage, you know? You've gotta grab life by the balls! Though I guess I don't exactly have balls, huh?"

She broke out into another bout of chortled laughter. "Anyway, thanks. You saved my life! I'm Clara—Clara Tokishima. Nice to meetcha!" she said, extending her hand.

Mushiki was more than a little confused, but he likewise reached out in turn.

"Mushiki Kuga," he said, shaking her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"...Hmm?"

Clara broke into a sudden frown, as if she'd found something unusual about his self-introduction. "Mushiki Kuga? You mean *that* Mushiki Kuga?"

"...? Which Mushiki Kuga?"

“No, I mean, er... Huh? You’re being serious? You’re not pulling my leg here?”

“Um... I mean, I’ve always been Mushiki Kuga...,” he replied uncertainly.

All at once, Clara tugged forcefully at his hand. “Mushiki Kuga! You’re like a celebrity! Wow, what a coincidence! Can I take a selfie with you?! Whoa! Awesome! Everyone’s gonna think I staged this!”

“Eh? Huh...?”

With no idea what she was talking about, he found himself squinting as Clara rattled on and on.

Then, when his confusion had risen considerably—

“...Aiiiee...!”

From somewhere in the distance, the rumble of footsteps approaching along with high-pitched screams rang out.

“...Huh?”

“Oh?”

Clara must have noticed them as well, as she flashed him a strange look.

It wasn’t long before the sound of hurried footsteps grew even louder, and a voice became clearly audible.

“Mushikiii!”

“Huh? Me?”

By the time he’d recognized who was calling out his name, she was sprinting toward him at high speed, kicking up a huge cloud of dust.

Just before she reached him, like slamming on brakes, she skidded to a halt, her long hair, tied in twin ponytails, fluttering violently behind her.

“...Ruri?” Mushiki squeaked, gazing back at her.

Right. Appearing before him was none other than his own sister and classmate, Ruri Fuyajoh.

She had been seriously injured during the incident not too long ago, but with the treatment and care provided by the Garden’s medical department, she was

once again able to move around freely—and was now perhaps a little *too* energetic.

“Here you are! What’s the meaning of this, Mushiki?! Explain yourself!” she exclaimed, leaning forward in excitement, grabbing him by the chest and shaking him back and forth.

“C-calm down. What’s going on...?” he stammered.

“...Hmm?” Ruri turned her eyes in suspicion to the girl standing beside him—with whom he was still shaking hands.

“Wha—?”

At that moment, indignation and anger dyed her cheeks even redder than they had been a moment ago.

“Who’s this?! She looks like a ticking time bomb! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Huh. Even if you’re thinking it, it isn’t cool to say something like that to someone’s face,” Clara said, whistling in astonishment.

Then, having another thought, her tone turned regretful. “Ah... Wait, are you his girlfriend? Tch. I should have known he’d be taken.”

“G-g-g-g-g-girlfriend?!” Ruri cried out, her face a bright scarlet now. “Mushiki! Is *that* how you’re introducing me to people?!”

She shook him again, even stronger than before—though she did seem somehow happier this time.

“I—I didn’t say anything...”

“Then what’s all this talk about girlfriends?! I’m not kidding here! You and me, we’re brother and sister! We can’t go around breaking social morals!”

“Huh? You’re siblings? She’s your sister?!” Clara exclaimed, her expression brightening. “Ah, now I get it. I thought you looked pretty similar. So that’s it. Heh, I guess I made a mistake there.”

“Huh...?! Wh-wh-what are you saying...?! Don’t be stupid! His girlfriend?! I’m sorry I called you a ticking time bomb; do you want to get a juice or

something?” Ruri screamed, her face crimson as she grabbed Mushiki by the collar and flung him back and forth even stronger and faster than before. To any outside observer, his head must have been little more than a blur.

“Oh my *god*, Mushiki. You should have told me you had a cute little sister! Huh? Mushiki? Hello? Can you hear me in there?” Clara asked in a carefree manner.

“I-I’ll do anything... Just...stop her...,” he stammered, unable to focus his vision as Ruri was still shaking him from side to side.

Clara, seeming to have struck on an idea, gestured wildly. “All right, got it. But if you want me to stop her, you’d better be fine with me taking one of her arms. If I do it, will you give me a reward?”

“F-fine... Just hurry...”

“Okay! Got it!” Clara said with a wink as she made a peace sign, before quietly approaching Ruri from behind.

“*Chomp!*”

Without warning, she bit down on Ruri’s earlobe.

“Kyargh...?!”

Ruri shuddered as she let go of Mushiki’s collar. “Wh-wh-what are you doing?!”

“I just thought you had such pretty ears is all.”

“A-are you crazy?!” Ruri cried, backing away as she held a hand against her bitten ear.

Mushiki, who was still spinning around and feeling dizzy, fell on the ground on his back.

“Um... Ruri. So...what did you want...?” he asked.

With that, her eyebrows twitched as though only now remembering why she was looking for her brother. “Ngh. Right... I guess that has to come first!”

With those words, she pulled her phone from her pocket and held the screen in front of him.



Mushiki, still dazed, rested a hand on his forehead as he glanced down at the display.

It looked to be an official website for the Garden. So not only was there a video-sharing site and a social networking service, but this one, too?

“...An article about the interschool demonstration battle...? What of it?”

Indeed, the article on the screen was about the very match against the Shadow Tower’s representatives who, as Saika, he had just approved a short while ago.

It seemed that the Garden’s representatives had also just been decided. Kuroe had said the contestants would be announced right before the event—but come to think of it, there *were* only two more days to go, so maybe he shouldn’t have been so surprised.

Honoka Moegi (third year).

Touya Shinozuka (third year).

Ryouji Endou (third year).

Ruri Fuyajoh (second year).

“Ah, you’re in there,” Mushiki exclaimed.

“Huh?” Ruri’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

No doubt her shock wasn’t at the fact that she had been chosen as one of the Garden’s representatives, which she must have already known, but rather that Mushiki had decided to focus on that point.

“Yep, I was pretty sure you’d be picked, Ruri.”

“Well... That’s the thing... Hee-hee... I guess I was just lucky...,” she said shyly, her cheeks turning slightly red.

Mushiki shook his head. “There’s no need to be modest. You have the skills. You’re amazing, really. I’ll be cheering for you all the way!”

“I-it’s not like I’ll be doing it for *you*... But thanks?!”

“Yep. Good luck, Ruri!” he said warmly.

“Huh-hmm...!” she hummed, turning away to leave.

A few seconds later, as though suddenly remembering something, her shoulders shook, and she quickly came back.

“...Why are you ending the conversation like that?!” she cried.

“Huh? Um... Sorry.”

He hadn’t meant to bring the discussion to a close, and strictly speaking, it was Ruri who had tried to leave... But he apologized anyway.

Watching on from the sidelines, Clara broke out into gales of laughter. “Ah-ha-ha, your sister’s pretty funny, huh?”

Ruri glared at her, then thrust her phone in front of Mushiki yet again.

“Look farther down! What the hell did you do?!”

“Farther down...?”

As instructed, he glanced to the bottom of the screen...

“...Huh?”

As he made out the words, his eyes shot wide open.

But that response was only natural.

After all, at the bottom of the Garden’s lists of selected representatives—the name *Mushiki Kuga* stood out in brilliant letters.

“Huh... Eh? How...?”

He could only gape in incomprehension. It made no sense.

Ruri, however, wasn’t about to let up. “The Garden’s five representatives are supposed to be the school’s best and brightest. So why were *you*, a new transfer student, picked?!”

“N-no... I don’t understand it, either. Wasn’t it an AI that picked out the names? There has to be some sort of mistake...”

“—!”

Ruri jumped back in alarm, having apparently realized something.

“I see... If that’s case...,” she mumbled, deep in thought, before glancing up and calling out at the top of her lungs, “Silvelle?! Are you there?!”

The next moment, with perfect timing, the figure of a young girl appeared directly in front of Mushiki.

“Yes! You called?”

“What...?!” he gawked.

She had simply *appeared*—and that was the only way he could describe it. She hadn’t walked over from anywhere, nor had she fallen from the sky or crawled out from the ground. Her body had simply formed from rapidly amassing particles of glittering light.

Her long, silvery hair was as straight as could be, as though held down by gravity, and her radiant smile gave her the look of a saint. Her white robe only complemented her graceful beauty but was unable to conceal her buxom chest, so large that it seemed to contrast with her otherwise virtuous appearance.

“Wh-what the...?” Mushiki yelled in shock.

“This is Silvelle, the artificial intelligence that manages the Garden’s databases and provides security for the entire campus,” Ruri murmured in explanation.

“Artificial intelligence...? But she’s really here...”

“As a projection. Try touching her,” Ruri instructed.

“Huh? Like this?” he asked, before reaching out.

Without any resistance, his hand sank straight through her chest. Indeed, just as Ruri had suggested, the girl had no physical body.

“Kyargh!”

“Eh?”

But before he could say anything more, Silvelle’s cheeks turned scarlet as she hugged her chest tightly.

Her movements were so smooth that they could have been programmed just for this purpose. The attention that her designers had put into crafting her was readily apparent.

“Oh dear... You’re a bad boy. I’m sorry, but I don’t have a physical body. If I did, I might be able to quell that raging bull inside you,” she said with a gentle smile.

The discrepancy between her words and actions was incredible.

“Wh-where are you touching her?!” Ruri screamed in his ear.

...And she was the one who had suggested trying it.

Her reaction *was* a little unreasonable—but it was also true that Mushiki had been somewhat careless, and any further complaint would only complicate the situation even more. With that thought, he gave a meek bow.

“Seriously, Silvelle... You’re the one who picked the names for the exhibition match, right? I’d like to ask you a few questions about that.”

At this, Silvelle fixed Ruri with a sweet smile. *“Sis.”*

“Huh?”

“You need to call me Sis. But I guess Sister would be okay, too, maybe?”

“...”

Ruri’s cheeks twitched, a vein throbbing on her forehead. Nonetheless, she eventually exhaled with a strained, inexpressive sound: “Silvelle. Sis.”

“Hmm... That’s good enough, I suppose. An elder sister is expected to have a big, open heart, you know?” Silvelle said, cupping her chin with her index finger. *“So I’ll answer your questions, my lovely Ruuru... Yes, I made the selection. I’m proud to say I based my decision on a wide range of comprehensive data points, including each mage’s grades and combat performance. Don’t worry, there wasn’t any question when it came to your selection, Ruuru! No complaints there, I hope?”*

No doubt that by *Ruuru*, she meant Ruri.

Ruri looked like she had something to say about all that, but she let it slide for the time being. “I don’t care about me right now... Why did you pick Mushiki? He’s just an amateur who only recently transferred into the Garden. This has to be some kind of mistake, right?”

“Not at all. I took a comprehensive look at Mukkie and determined that he qualifies to be a representative of the Garden.”

“Mukkie?” he repeated, pointing to himself.

That seemed to be her nickname for him.

Clara, watching on, appeared to find the whole exchange somehow amusing.

Ruri, however, didn’t laugh one bit, and her eyes expressed irritation. “I said I want to know why! What on earth made you come to *that* decision?!”

“Very well,” Silvelle said with a glowing smile.

“Mukkie’s records show that he has single-handedly defeated a mythic-class annihilation factor.”

That revelation was simply too much to process.

“...”

A few seconds passed, the whole area remaining silent.

Ruri wore a blank look, and even Mushiki himself was speechless.

But that wasn’t at all surprising.

A mythic-class annihilation factor. That term struck a chord in his memory. It seemed to be a generic name for twelve of the most potent threats that the world had faced over time, dangers that only Saika could defeat. When he had first heard of them, he had remarked to himself how incredible Saika was, so it was only natural that he remembered the name.

But he couldn’t comprehend the rest of Silvelle’s sentence.

“...Huh?”

It was Ruri who finally broke the silence.

She rested a hand against her forehead in disbelief. “A mythic-class annihilation factor? *Single-handedly*? Hold on a second. What are you going on about, Silvelle? Don’t tell me you’re on the fritz there?”

“H-how mean. You’ll make me cry saying that, you know?” Silvelle raised her hands to her face as though to wipe away a stream of tears.

Ruri, however, didn't seem to have the patience to respond to this delicate gesture. "Just so we're clear, a mythic-class annihilation factor...? We're talking about *those*, right? Threats that can't be measured by the regular grading system, so they get assigned a special ranking?"

"That's our Ruuru! You know your stuff!"

"Enough with the fake compliments... There have only been twelve cases like that over the past five hundred years, and Madam Witch dealt with each one of them, right?"

"Yes. But I should note—a thirteenth case was confirmed just recently."

"...?!"

Ruri's eyes widened at this latest piece of information.

Nevertheless, she must have determined that her first priority was to confirm the details, as she asked in her quavering voice, "A-and you're saying...*Mushiki* defeated it...?"

"Affirmative. It's so hard to believe, but you went all out for everyone in the Garden, didn't you, Mukkie? Your big sis Silvelle here was moved to tears."

"What kind of annihilation factor was it?! And how did Mushiki manage to stop it?!"

"That information has been marked as confidential," Silvelle said without once dropping her beaming smile.

"..."

Ruri fell silent for a moment, then quickly grabbed Mushiki by the arm as he tried, unsuccessfully, to sneak away.

"Eeep!"

"What's the meaning of this, Mushiki?! When did you...?! No, *how* did you...?!"

"N-no, I don't know what she's talking about! I don't..."

At that moment, a certain memory flashed through his mind.

He *didn't* know anything about any mythic-class annihilation factors. That was

the honest truth.

However, a few weeks ago, he *had* confronted a foe equal to—or perhaps even superior to—such adversaries.

“Ah...”

Kuroe had mentioned something like this—that the term *annihilation factor* didn’t refer to specific creatures or entities but was a general name for anything that had the potential to destroy the world.

In that sense, *she* had certainly fit the bill.

“...?! What’s with that face?! Why do you look like you know what she’s blabbering on about?!”

“N-no, I’m not making any face... I don’t—”

“Don’t play dumb with me! You think I don’t understand my own brother’s reactions?!”



“Eh?”

“...Forget I said that! More importantly...”

But at that moment—

“Huh?”

Just as she closed in on him with an ominous look on her face, Ruri’s voice was drowned out.

The alarm signaling the appearance of a new annihilation factor was sounding throughout the Garden.

Chapter 2

[BREAKING]

◀ I Got a Boyfriend! ▶

“What the...?”

A barrier wall encircled Void’s Garden to separate the school from the outside world—and Mushiki, alongside countless other mages, stood atop the fortification, looking down at the scene unfolding before them.

His voice was strained, but that was to be expected.

After all, the city outside the Garden was filled with countless gel-like substances.

No, the term *substance* was a misnomer, as the viscous masses crawling all over the ground and walls were living things.

“Annihilation Factor No. 329: Slimes.” Ruri breathed out, watching the city through narrowed eyes from atop the barrier wall.

“...They’re calamity-class annihilation factors. Individually, they’re not all that powerful—the problem is when they swarm together, like they’re doing now. If left unchecked, this whole area could be consumed. The window for reversible annihilation is twenty-four hours. If we don’t deal with them all within that time, what we’re seeing now will be recorded in the history of the world as the *result*.”

She sounded strangely like she was trying to explain the situation, prompting Mushiki to tilt his head as he looked at her askance.

“...Huh? Are you saying all that for me?”

“Huuuh?! Wh-wh-what?! A-a-are you an idiot?! It’s just a habit I’ve got! Stop

thinking everything's always about you!" she cried with a threatening air.

"R-right. Sorry..."

She was saying things that any mage ought to know, so he had wondered whether she was trying to help him out, seeing how he had only just recently entered the Garden... But it looked like he had been overthinking it. Still, that was an incredible habit of hers, he thought with a nod.

Ruri puffed out her cheeks. "Anyway, why were *you* called up to help deal with them?! Isn't *that* weird?!"

"You don't need to tell me...", he murmured nervously as he scratched at his cheek.

Indeed. Probably on account of the large number of annihilation factors this time around, a full thirty students had been selected to eradicate them—and for some reason, his name was listed among them. Which meant this was essentially his first official mission.

Ruri must have realized that, too. She clicked her tongue in displeasure and stepped boldly forward, the epaulets on her uniform flapping in the wind.

"Anyway. Just shut up and watch. We'll come back to this conversation when I'm finished... Ruri Fuyajoh, heading out!"

With that, she took off from the top of the barrier wall with a mighty leap.

At that moment, her feet lit up with magical light as she stepped over the edge—her body defying gravity as it traced a gentle arc and descended into the city.

"Second Substantiation: Luminous Blade!"

A clear voice echoed, and though she was already a speck in the distance, a blue light erupted by her side.

That ever-changing blade forged of pure magic traced a path through the air like a supple whip or the tail of a raging beast—and as it did so, countless slimes slithering around her vanished in bright bursts of light.

"Whoa...!"

Such was the overwhelming figure of Ruri Fuyajoh, the Garden's most powerful knight.

Her actions were uplifting enough to inspire the other mages lined up on the barrier wall, several of whom promptly leaped down after her.

While not quite at her level, they were all highly capable in their own right, and they set about steadily defeating the milling annihilation factors.

As Ruri had said, they probably would be able to take care of all this even without Mushiki's help.

Nonetheless...

"...?"

Feeling a strange gaze watching him from behind, he spun around.

Some of the remaining mages were whispering among themselves as they watched him guardedly.

"Is *he* the guy everyone's talking about? Mushiki Kuga...?"

"Ah. You know Ruri Fuyajoh, the S-ranked mage? He's her elder brother, and after just one month of transferring into the Garden, he got picked for the exhibition match..."

"I heard he defeated a mythic-class annihilation factor all by himself..."

"You're kidding! Just what kind of magic is he using...?!"

"Heh... Let's see how he does..."

Why did it feel like the weight of expectation was bearing down on him?

"..."

He wasn't about to let himself get dragged into a dangerous situation just because of a little gossip, but he couldn't just watch idly from the sidelines after having been selected as part of the team to put down the monsters.

Of course, he couldn't endanger Saika's body, either—but being a mage himself, he would inevitably be called to an actual battle sooner or later.

As he made his decision—fists clenched and stepping forward—he heard

shocked gasps behind him.

“...”

But he came to a stop at the edge of the barrier wall. The city was much farther down than he had thought.

Ruri and the others had focused their magic into their legs to soften the fall, but to be perfectly honest, he wasn't confident enough to pull that off just yet. If he wasn't careful, he might not even manage to land the jump properly.

“All right.”

So long as he was inhabiting Saika's body, he couldn't overdo it. He nodded as he made up his mind and headed for the staircase.

“Huh...? He's taking the stairs?!”

“Don't tell me he was too afraid to jump...?”

“Are you kidding? That guy took down a Mythologia. He's gotta have some reason for doing this...”

“L-let's go with him!”

With that buzz of excitement at his back, Mushiki reached the bottom and ran through the gate into the city—the remaining mages following behind him.

“...”

He found himself catching his breath at the sight of the cityscape stretching out ahead.

Seen from the ground, the peculiarity of the situation was even more readily apparent.

Strange gooey creatures were swarming all over the familiar city streets. Maybe the people had escaped indoors, or perhaps they had all been absorbed by the slimes, but there was no sign of human activity—as if the position of the dominant species at this locale had just been completely usurped.

“—”

The slimes had clearly noticed them, as no sooner had Mushiki and the others stepped outside the Garden than they stirred in alarm.

“Ngh! Here goes!”

“Argh!”

The mages, too, must have sensed the slimes’ heightened caution, as they each called out, readying themselves and activating their world crests and second substantiations.

“—!”

The slimes launched into their assault all at once.

In the blink of an eye, the area was transformed into a mage’s battlefield.

The slimes with their huge bodies expanded more, colliding with the mages’ second substantiations as chaos ensued.

“Ngh...”

Mushiki, late to the party, focused on attempting to manifest his sword.

...But that sword, his second substantiation that he had activated so easily during his training with Kuroe, didn’t appear.

“This...isn’t right...”

“—!”

As he turned around, a slime leaped up to engulf him from above.

“Wh-what...?!”

He dived to the ground, rolling to dodge the attack, while the slime crashed down right where he had been standing.

“Ow-w-w...”

He was still reeling from the impact and rubbed the ache from his head.

But he understood well enough that this was no place to dawdle.

All at once, the area around him turned suddenly dark.

...As though a huge *something* had blocked out the sun.

“Eh...?”

Stunned, he glanced upward.

Countless slimes were coalescing right before his eyes, eventually forming a towering silhouette.

“Huh?” he rasped, when—

“—!”

The huge slime let out a deafening high-pitched roar, its body expanding as it spread out like a tidal wave.

Mushiki was so shocked that he could do little but accept the oncoming attack.

Yet—

“Ah, that won’t do! I won’t have any of that!” said an echoing voice.

The next moment, in the shape of a cross, the slime’s gigantic body was sliced clean.

“—?!”

The huge annihilation factor let out a shrill shriek, then collapsed into a mass of liquid.

It spread over the ground, before finally stopping motionless.

“Eh...?”

Unable to comprehend what had just happened, he simply blinked repeatedly in mute shock.

Then a young girl gently landed right where the massive slime had been a short moment ago.

“I got here in the nick of time, huh? Are you okay?”

“You...”

Mushiki’s eyes bulged from his head as he recognized the individual standing before him.

“Tokishima?!”

Yep. Standing before him was none other than Clara Tokishima, who was gripping a dangerous chainsaw-like weapon with her heart-shaped world crest

activated around her lower abdomen.

“Hiya! Just call me Clara!” she said, twisting her body and turning her gaze upward.

Mushiki followed suit—and found what appeared to be a winged smartphone floating in midair.

“So I decided to butt into this annihilation factor mission! If you’re enjoying the show, hit the LIKE button and subscribe to my channel!” She paused to pose before the camera.

“A-are you...filming this?”

“Hmm, more like streaming, I guess? I mean, think of the number of viewers you’d get streaming an annihilation factor takedown mission!”

“R-right...”

So that last scene, in which he had been helplessly overwhelmed, had also been broadcasted to the world? He did his best not to dwell too much on that thought, at least for the time being.

He would be lying if he said he wasn’t embarrassed, but he couldn’t complain to the very person who had just saved his life.

“Ah, I’m glad you’re safe! Can you stand?” Clara asked, approaching with light steps as she reached out to him with a helping hand.

“Ah... Yeah. Thanks.”

He took her hand in his own and climbed to his feet.

Then Clara pointed back to the smartphone still hovering in the air.

“Now, look up here! Give us a radiant, winning smile!”

“U-um... Okay.”

If she was acting the part of a hero who had just rushed in to save a helpless civilian, it somewhat made sense that she would want to take a picture.

...Well, he couldn’t exactly say that wasn’t how it had all played out, though. So as instructed, he forced a smile as he glanced up at the camera.

The next moment, Clara wrapped her arm around his shoulder and pulled him close.

And then—

“Hee-hee-hee. It’s time for an introduction! This is Mushiki Kuga! My new boyfriend!”

“...Huh?!”

How could she blurt out something so ridiculous to the entire world?!





“...”

The day after their skirmish against the slime annihilation factors, Mushiki was making his way down the path to the central school building when he was overcome with a feeling of intense discomfort.

He was simply walking along the sidewalk, but the eyes of every student and teacher who he passed seemed to widen in surprise, and they started whispering among themselves.

There were two main reasons for their reactions.

The first was—

“...Huh? Isn’t that Mushiki Kuga?”

“Eh? You mean from the exhibition match?”

“So apart from Madam Witch, he’s the only person who’s ever managed to defeat a mythic-class annihilation factor?!”

Yes, rumors of his selection to represent the Garden in the interschool demonstration battle and of his takedown of a mythic-class annihilation factor had spread.

The second reason was—

“Did you see Clara’s live stream?”

“I saw it, dammit. What the hell? A boyfriend...? I mean, it’s not like I thought she would ever go out with the likes of *me*, but still...”

“...Tch. Is that him, over there? Is *he* Mushiki Kuga?”

“Kuga? You mean her new boyfriend?”

“Seriously? Whoa...”

Indeed, Clara’s comments on her previous live stream had kicked up a scandal.

After being recognized the first time, Mushiki started hiding his face—but it was already too late. His name and photographs were all over MagiTube’s most

popular channel.

Just one of those rumors would have caused enough trouble, but two at the same time? He had become the center of attention overnight.

“You’re in a little trouble, aren’t you?” Kuroe remarked, appearing by his side with the blankest expression.

Like him, she, too, was wearing her Garden uniform.

“Yeah... I never expected this to happen,” he replied with a frown.

“I apologize for your selection in the demonstration match,” she continued, maintaining her pace by his side. “I was careless. I had no idea *she* had been identified as an annihilation factor,” she mumbled.

Well, her reluctance to say *her* name out loud wasn’t unreasonable. *She* was a well-known figure at the Garden—and if anyone was to overhear them mention her true identity, they would end up with another problem on their hands.

Which was precisely why Mushiki couldn’t shake his anxiety.

Turning to Kuroe, his expression grim, he asked, “If that AI—Silvelle, right?—knows about my fight, that means she also knows about *her*, doesn’t it...?”

“I can’t rule out the possibility... But the fact that the details have been classified as confidential suggests that Silvelle understands the risks involved. I think it highly unlikely that any information will be made public.”

“I see... I wish she kept the details about me a secret as well...”

“I suspect she thought it would be a major loss for the Garden not to properly evaluate a mage strong enough to defeat a mythic-class opponent... In any event, the Garden takes information confidentiality very seriously. If anyone was to try to access any records without permission, they would have to be prepared to face severe punishment.”

Kuroe paused for a moment, then averted her gaze. “Well, probably only Knight Fuyajoh would be willing to go that far.”

“That’s what I’m most afraid of,” Mushiki answered with a nervous sweat.

“Good luck. She *is* your younger sister, yes?” Kuroe added with an

unreasonable degree of faith in the strength of their familial bonds. “Anyway, we have no choice but to keep it a secret. Records will remain, but everyone will eventually adapt to the situation. Do be careful about undergoing any state conversions while the spotlight is on you.”

“...Right, I understand. So um, what should we do about the exhibition match?” he asked.

Kuroe hesitated for a moment, deep in thought. “Yes... I don’t know if it will be possible to change the selection now that it has been announced... But I’ll see what I can do.”

“Sorry,” Mushiki whispered. “I know this is probably a handful.”

Kuroe cleared her throat. “More importantly, Mushiki. I would like to ask you something.”

“...Yes?”

She hadn’t said anything yet, so why did he feel like he knew exactly what she was about to say? Ill at ease, he responded with a short nod.

Her cold eyes became even colder as she murmured under her breath, “I didn’t expect you to be such a flirt.”

“I’m not! Ugh, Kuroe!” he protested, desperate to salvage her image of him.

“Is that right? Am I mistaken? That display of *mutual affection* was conveyed very clearly.”

“It’s all a mistake! Clara just went and said that all by herself!”

“When I introduced you to MagiTube, I never expected you to use it that way. And on the very day I showed you how to access it.”

“You have to believe me!” he cried, but just before he could properly explain himself—

“Ah!” He heard the buoyant, lively voice from behind him. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you! You disappeared right after the battle yesterday!”

“Um...”

As though hit over the head by that voice, he turned around—and as he did so, his whole body stiffened.

But that was to be expected. After all, it was none other than the very person at the center of their current conversation, the MagiTuber Clara Tokishima.

“You left me feeling so lonely! But that’s okay. We should get to know each other a bit more. So let’s chat. Or maybe I’ve got the order wrong? Nah, that can’t be right. It’s important to follow the set rules, right? You’ve got to finish making a jug before you can pour water into it, huh? Relationships are pretty similar, don’t you think?”

She spoke in an easygoing manner as she drew close, then linked her arm through his as though it was the most natural thing in the world. She even took his hand in her own, interlocking her fingers with his.

It had all happened so quickly that only two short seconds had passed.

“Wait... Hold on...”

The sweet aroma of her fragrant lotion and the soft, undeniable touch of those delicate fingers forced him to acknowledge with every fiber of his being that he was in the presence of a girl. He could feel his cheeks turning red.

“Huh? Is that...?”

“Whoa, seriously? It’s really them!”

Passersby began to buzz as they recognized Clara, whispering among themselves as they snapped photos with their phones without the slightest hesitation. But far from making an annoyed face, Clara happily struck an exuberant pose. Of course, Mushiki, whose arm she was still gripping tightly, was included in those pictures. He could do little else but stand there in silent despair.

“ ... ”

It was the sight of Kuroe staring at them coldly that made him snap back to his senses.

Yes. He was clearly taken aback by the suddenness of the situation.

Mushiki, however, already had someone in his heart.

Making up his mind, he gently shook off Clara's arm and untangled their fingers.

"...Um, Clara?"

"Hm? What's up? Oh, are photos off-limits or something?" she asked with genuine confusion.

He shook his head. "That's not it," he said softly. "We're not even dating, are we?"

"Huh? Really?" Her eyes bulged with genuine shock. "But didn't you say you'd...you know...give me a *reward*? If I stopped your cute little sister?"

"That's... I suppose I *did* say that."

"Right? So I figured we could go on a date. I want that to be my reward."

"That's a pretty heavy request, isn't it?!" Mushiki gawked.

Clara giggled. "Well, you know what they say—people have different tastes in music! Well, if we're *too* different, I guess we'll just have to call it quits... But anyway, let's go out again sometime, Mushipi!"

"*Mushipi*?"

"That's my nickname for you. You are my boyfriend, after all, Mushipi."

"..."

He felt that he should have made some remark about the odd pet name—but at the moment he had other things on his mind.

"I'm sorry," he said with a strong shake of his head. "I can't do that."

"Huh? Why not? Am I not your type? I know I'm a little weird, but I'm serious about giving this my all, y'know?"

"No, I mean, all that aside... I already have someone that I like."

At this, Clara let out a long, drawn-out whistle. "Ah... So that's it. I guess it *is* the springtime of youth, huh...? But you two aren't actually dating yet, right?"

"That's... Well, maybe it's an unrequited love," he answered as he scratched his cheek.

“Ah, you’re so cute when you blush!” Clara exclaimed, staring into his eyes once more. “By the way, who is she? I promise you, I’m not about to lose to any other girl here! I’ll definitely win your heart, Mushipi!”

“It’s Saika.”

“Gahaw?!”

No sooner had he uttered that name than Clara stumbled backward, her reaction resembling those seen in manga.

“S-Saika...? You mean Madam Witch? In charge of the Garden?”

“Yep.”

“...Ha... Whew... You’re wearing a pretty straight face there as you casually announce that you’re gunning for the big game...”

Clara staggered, raising a hand to her lips as though to wipe away a trickle of blood (which, of course, there wasn’t any). She probably hadn’t expected him to name Saika, of all people.

But she quickly shook her head to regain her composure, then pointed at him with her forefinger outstretched as though to punch a hole through his heart.

“But no one can stop a maiden in love! Even if I’m fighting against Madam Witch herself, Clara here will never give up!” she cried fervently.

At that moment, a light chime sounded from inside her pocket.

“Hmm? Oops, is it really that time already? I got completely carried away!” She pulled her phone out from her pocket, tapped the screen a few times, then turned her gaze swiftly back to him. “Well, I’ve said everything I came to say, so I’ll be off! See you later, Mushipi!” she said, making a heart sign with her fingers before dashing away down the sidewalk.

...From her entrance right up to her departure, she had been like a raging hurricane.

“...She’s gone,” he muttered under his breath once she was out of sight.

“Indeed. Though, those parting words of hers were rather ominous,” Kuroe added.

“...?”

Mushiki frowned. Kuroe, usually so expressionless, seemed to have a vaguely satisfied look about her.

“Kuroe? Is something wrong?”

“...? Hmm?”

“Ah... Well, if it’s nothing, that’s okay.”

With that, she tilted her head and turned her gaze straight ahead.

“More importantly, we should hurry,” she said. “That took up more time than I anticipated.”

“Right. We’ll be late for homeroom.”

“Not that,” she murmured with a shake of her head. “We aren’t going to the classroom today.”

“Huh?” Mushiki responded, his mouth agape.

Kuroe kept her voice low so she wouldn’t be overheard. “Today we have to welcome our guests from the Tower.”

“The Tower...? Ah, you mean...?”

Only then did he manage to put the pieces together. Ahead, the road leading to the central school building was lined with unfamiliar decorations.

On both sides of the street, simple food stalls had been set up—almost as if a campus festival were about to get underway.

“But won’t the exhibition match be held tomorrow?”

“Yes, but there will be a welcome ceremony today—and celebrations tonight.”

“Ah, I see. In that case...”

He looked around, when Kuroe finished his sentence for him. “That being the case, we have to attend the ceremony. And need to finish our preparations, and —”

At that moment, she furrowed her brow and dragged him by the arm to lead

him into a space between two nearby buildings.

“Wha—? What’s this all of a sudden, Kuroe...?”

“Shhh. Be quiet.” She raised a finger to her mouth as she glanced back at the street.

Mushiki followed suit—and quickly realized why she had acted that way.

Ruri was walking with a friend down the sidewalk where the two of them had been standing until just a moment ago.

“...”

Her face was awash with anger, her forward-leaning posture close to that of a ferocious predator. Mushiki could feel the deadly atmosphere radiating from her.

She clearly wasn’t in her usual good mood.

If he had to make a comparison, she looked like someone whose brother had just given them the slip—right after witnessing that same brother get claimed as some suspicious woman’s boyfriend in a weird internet video. She gave that kind of impression.

“R-Ruri... Let’s calm down a little, okay? You’re scaring everyone,” urged a gentle-looking girl by her side with knit brows—Hizumi Nagekawa, Ruri’s friend and roommate.

“...Calm down? You say the strangest things, Hizumi. Can’t you see I’m already calm?”

“R-really...?”

“Yep. My blood is practically freezing over.”

“Th-that doesn’t sound good...?!”

As the two bantered, the students around them couldn’t help but take note of Ruri’s extraordinary aura, quickly fleeing or averting their gazes.

Mushiki had broken out into a nervous sweat just watching from a distance.

“...Thank you, Kuroe. That was a close one.”

“Not at all. For the time being, it’s best she doesn’t see you like that,” Kuroe whispered.

“...?”

But the next moment, as Ruri made her way down the sidewalk, she came to a sudden stop and started looking around in suspicion.

“What’s wrong, Ruri?”

“...Can’t you feel something? My brother’s presence?”

“H-his presence...?”

“Yeah. It’s faint. Like he was here around a hundred and ten seconds ago.”

“I can’t feel anything... Maybe you’re just imagining it?”

“You think I would mistake my own brother’s presence?”

“I suppose not...,” Hizumi said with a frown.

Ruri wrinkled her nose a few times, then began to slowly approach the building where Mushiki and Kuroe were hiding.

“...! She’s coming this way...!”

Mushiki’s voice stuck in his throat as he glanced behind him—the passageway, however, looked too narrow for them to make a quick escape.

“We’re left with no choice,” Kuroe murmured, grabbing him by the shoulders and pressing him up against the wall.

“Um... Kuroe? What are you...?”

“We’re going to need to initiate a state conversion. In any event, I was planning on doing it prior to the ceremony.”

“A state conversion...” Mushiki gasped.

Yes, an interchange between the two bodies that lay dormant inside him, his own and that of Saika.

When changing from Saika to himself, he needed to be sufficiently excited to increase the amount of magical energy that he naturally released.

But when transforming from his own body to Saika’s, it was necessary for him

to take in magical energy from an external source.

And the most efficient way of doing that was—

“...”

Still perfectly expressionless, Kuroe lifted her chin to face him.

“U-um, hold on a second there, Kuroe...”

“We don’t have time. How often have we done this now? Why are you hesitating?”

“I guess that’s true, but still...” He looked away, his cheeks burning.

She was right, of course, but he also knew that she was the real Saika. So it was only natural that he would feel a little nervous when she was about to—

“Let’s just get this over with.”

“...!”

His whole body shuddered as those words escaped her lips.

Kuroe wasn’t about to let that chance get away, homing in on his face, when —

“Mmm...”

Like that, she pressed her mouth against his lips.

“...”

Her soft, pliant touch—and her sweet aroma he faintly smelled—those sensations flooded his mind, his consciousness. Unable to move, he felt a shock as his vision flickered.

Then, a few seconds later—

“...Phew.”

By the time Kuroe pulled away, he had already fully transformed into Saika Kuozaki.

Yes. This act—a mouth-to-mouth kiss—was the most efficient means of absorbing magical energy from an external source.

“...”

With glazed eyes, Mushiki raised a finger to his lips where the memory of that kiss still lingered.

“...Was that a little longer than usual?” he asked.

“You must be imagining things,” Kuroe said matter-of-factly as she turned away.

She was already back to her usual self.

At that very moment, Ruri peeked in from the end of the alleyway.

“...Huh? Madam Witch? And Kuroe...? What are you both doing there?”

“Lady Saika spotted a rare insect,” came Kuroe’s threadbare excuse.

Mushiki forced a smile as he nodded along. “Ah... Yes. I was sure of it.”

“Oh? You’ve got an impressive intellectual curiosity, Madam Witch,” Ruri said in admiration as she continued to look around for any sign of her brother.

Realizing that he wasn’t there, she craned her neck, her brow furrowing.



“Is something the matter?”

“Ah... No. It must have been a misunderstanding...,” she said, before her eyes suddenly shot open. “Kuroe? What’s wrong? Your face looks a little red.”

“Huh?” Mushiki uttered after hearing Ruri’s remark.

“...Maybe you’re just seeing things?” Kuroe responded flatly, stepping out from the alleyway without once letting him see her face.



Around a month had passed since his double life as both Mushiki and Saika started.

While he had learned how to emulate Saika Kuozaki’s astonishing powers of observation, her obsessive learning ability, and her extreme commitment to her interests, there were still many situations that kept him on his toes.

Particularly, the times when he had to speak with Saika’s old acquaintances—or when his actions might risk damaging her reputation or social status.

And right now, the current situation posed both risks.

He was expected to entertain an individual who, like Saika, served as head of a mage-training institute.

“ ... ”

From his seat on the platform set up at the venue, Mushiki let out a weak sigh to relieve the tension building up inside him.

The large hall in the Garden’s eastern precinct had become the venue of a simple ceremony.

Normally, the students at the Garden would line up in orderly rows to fill the vast space, with the teachers and knights seated onstage at the front. The familiarity of the scene only added to the solemnity of the situation.

“How is everything, Lady Saika?” Kuroe asked, perhaps having sensed something was off about his appearance.

Incidentally, she was as expressionless as usual—that sight now being all too familiar to him.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking how it’s been a long time since I last met the head of the Tower,” Mushiki responded, trying his best to play the role expected of him.

“You needn’t worry too much,” Kuroe mumbled, catching on. “Master Gyousei Shionji of the Tower is an old acquaintance of yours, but you don’t actually have many opportunities to meet face-to-face. It’s highly unlikely that he would sense anything out of the ordinary.”

“Hmm...”

“On that count, Knight Fuyajoh is of much more concern.”

“Why does that ring true?” Mushiki whispered with a forced smile as he glanced over his shoulder at Ruri.

...She was sitting ramrod straight, cutting a magnificent figure as she glared at the amassed students through bloodshot eyes.

That being said, she didn’t seem to be actually watching the students to make sure that they didn’t misbehave. If anything, she looked more like she was scanning their faces to find someone in particular... Mushiki positively dreaded the thought of going back to the classroom.

“Ah, but there is one other important point,” Kuroe said as if only now remembering something.

Mushiki did his best to put Ruri out of mind for the time being, turning back to the matter at hand.

“An important point?” he repeated.

“Yes. Please make sure you don’t lose.”

“...? I mean, I’ll do my best, but—”

“No, I’m not talking about the exhibition match—”

At that moment, the Garden’s administrative AI, Silvelle, announced through the speakers set up all over the hall, “*The entourage from Shadow Tower will now enter the hall. Please welcome our guests with a warm round of applause.*”

No sooner had she finished speaking than the entrance doors began to slowly

swing open—and the group from the other school filed inside in an orderly line.

The cohort consisted of several teachers and more than a hundred students, male and female, each garbed in dark uniforms. The glowing realizing devices at the tips of their shoulder epaulettes indicated that they were all mages.

It wasn't long before the procession, marching to the applause of their hosts, reached the area of the hall set aside for them and came to a halt.

With that, the teachers leading them made their way to the stage occupied by Mushiki and the Garden's major figures.

At their forefront was an older man dressed in a mage's robe, with a deeply wrinkled and a long white beard. Despite his age, his posture and gait were impeccable.

There could be no doubt about it—this was Gyousei Shionji, Shadow Tower's headmaster. In appearance and bearing, he was just like the pictures that Mushiki had seen of him beforehand.

"It's been a long time since I last set foot in the Garden," he said as he approached Mushiki, holding out his hand.

"Yes, it's good to see you doing so well, Master Shionji."

Mushiki took a deep breath to quiet his racing heart, flashed his guest a smile, and extended his own hand in welcome.

But the very next moment, Shionji raised his middle finger right in front of his face.

"Huh?"

Mushiki gawked, his eyes bulging from the unexpected shock.

Then Shionji made a wry face, his gaze sharpened into a glower beneath his long eyebrows.

"You got me good last year, you evil witch! Every single time... You and your dastardly tricks...! I'll pay you back for all the humiliation you've put me through...! With interest!"

"Um..."

Mushiki was left reeling in confusion at the abusive tirade pouring from the old gentleman's mouth.

Naturally, he had heard the Tower's headmaster had a somewhat antagonistic relationship with Saika, but he hadn't expected the man to be so direct about it. He glanced at Kuroe in bewilderment.

"..."

Kuroe, unfazed, gave him a firm nod.

She didn't say anything—but for some reason, Mushiki felt as though the word *Go!* echoed in his mind.

...Ah. So this was what she had meant when she told him not to lose. Sweat dripped down his cheek, but nonetheless, he turned around to face Shionji.

"Oh? What a spineless greeting. Don't tell me the Tower is teaching people that the requisite effort and ingenuity employed to seize victory is no more than cowardice!"

"Ngh?! You wicked witch...! You think *that* was a show of effort and ingenuity?! Is that how your people at the Garden view what you did?!"

"..."

...What in the world *did* Saika do last year?

The two teachers on either side of the older man were both struggling to calm him down.

"W-well... Please, calm yourself, Headmaster," said a gentle-looking bespectacled woman.

"That's right, Master. What will you accomplish by being more hotheaded than our own students?" added a large man with scars all over his body.

Both teachers had been listed in the materials that Kuroe had prepared for Mushiki ahead of time. The first to speak was Wakaba Saeki, and the second, Tetsuga Suoh. Both were instructors at the Tower and aides to Shionji, equal in rank to the Knights of the Garden.

And they both looked to be quite levelheaded.

Mushiki hoped that the two would be able to calm their leader, even if only a little. Yet—

“She’s poison. Don’t fall into the clutches of this vicious, treacherous vixen.”

“I heard she *does* use poison—and rather casually at that, so it’s best not to get too close.”

Nope. The two were still belligerent—they just had a different way of showing it.

Mushiki was wondering how to respond to all this when Shionji steadied his breathing and fixed him with dauntless smirk. “Fine. Just remember—this year’s Tower is a different beast. Don’t expect this to play out like last time.”

“Oh? I look forward to it... To seeing you fall flat on your face.”

“Hmph... We’ll see!”

Then, perhaps sensing that the conversation had run its course, Silvelle’s voice sounded once more over the loudspeakers: “*With those warm and friendly greetings out of the way, let’s now introduce the contestants representing each side. The students who have been selected will now be called up to the stage.*”

Did that AI honestly consider *this* a friendly greeting, or was she being ironic? Mushiki couldn’t tell... Regardless, he wanted to put these formalities behind him as quickly as possible, so he looked away from Shionji to let Silvelle move the event along.

The next moment, the lights in the hall dimmed as an image was projected above the stage.

“*Representing Void’s Garden—Honoka Moegi, third year.*”

With that announcement, Honoka’s image appeared on the screen amid a barrage of flashy special effects. The atmosphere seemed more like a martial arts contest than a friendly bout between two schools.

“H-here!” answered a girl in a Garden uniform, stepping up to the stage and looking slightly nervous.

The audience broke into a round of applause and cheers.

“Touya Shinozuka, third year.”

“Ah.”

Next came a tall male student, waving to an explosion of excited shouts from the audience.

“Ruri Fuyajoh, second year.”

“Yes!”

As her name was called, Ruri, already sitting onstage, quickly rose to her feet—and with that, the adulation of the students watching increased to an even greater level.

As to be expected of an S-ranked mage and a mainstay of the Knights of the Garden, she was acknowledged by all—and incredibly popular to boot.

As someone who knew her on a personal level, it all struck Mushiki as a little incongruent.

The students continued with their applause, and Silvelle read out the next name, *“Next we have Mushiki Kuga, second year, who is unable to join us right now due to him feeling under the weather.”*

This had all been arranged in advance. So long as he was attending the ceremony as Saika, it was impossible to appear as himself.

In stark contrast to their previous applause, the audience lashed out with a wave of booing... And their jeers seemed to say, *How could one of our own representatives miss the opening ceremony? Or, He ran off! That damn Mushipi...* Regardless, he did his best not to dwell on this outpouring of negativity.

With four of the Garden’s representatives now introduced, only one more remained.

A particularly flashy set of visual effects were projected on the overhead screen as the final student’s photograph and name appeared in prominent letters.

“Saika Kuozaki, second year.”

And her name and picture appeared.

“...Huh?” he wondered aloud, tilting his head.

Did he just see something strange?

But the astonishment of the representatives from the Tower far outweighed his own shock.

“Huuuhhh?! Wait a minute!”

The teachers and students from the opposing school all cried out in unison, the air in the huge venue trembling from their loud protests.

“Wh-what’s the meaning of this?! Why is *your* name up there?!” Shionji cried out, pointing at Mushiki in dismay.

“Ah, um, er...”

He, too, was left speechless, and so perhaps attempting to cover for him, it was Silvelle who responded, *“Saachie—I mean, Saika Kuozaki—enrolled as a student last month. She’s perfectly qualified to compete.”*

“...Huh?!” Shionji’s eyes bulged in incomprehension.

“The most promising students from each school are selected to take part, in both magical ability and fighting experience. So taking that into account, I concluded that she would be a suitable representative for the Garden.”

“No doubt! But still...” Shionji dug his heels into the stage like a spoiled child.

...Well, Silvelle’s logic wasn’t wrong, but this certainly would be a baffling development for any outsider.

With everyone around him paralyzed with confusion, Mushiki lowered his voice and whispered to the figure behind his shoulder, “Kuroe?”

“What is it?”

“...Um, I thought you said you would see what you could do about changing the selected individuals?”

“Yes. So I had Lady Saika’s name added as one of our representatives.”

“...I see?”

Why would you do that?! He felt like screaming to the heavens, but he buried his panic and tried to address her with the utmost calm. To be dismayed and worried wasn't part of Saika's personality.

"I need to ask. Why would you do that?"

"I did everything I could, but I wasn't able to rescind Mushiki's nomination."

"Hmm."

"So I gave another student's slot to Lady Saika."

"...If you could do that, why not Mushiki's?"

"It seems the five representatives were given different responsibilities. Mushiki, whose record shows that he defeated a mythic-class annihilation factor, was designated a priority that couldn't be changed."

"...I see. So why nominate *me*, then?" he asked.

Kuroe let out a long exhale through her nose. "Mushiki might have defeated *her*, but his mastery of magic is still very unstable. Going up against the Tower's best students, we can't rule out the possibility that he might be killed."

"Ah... I guess that's true."

"If we don't have enough fighting potential to make up for his absence, we could very well lose this exhibition match."

"..."

With that, Mushiki finally understood.

The other day, Kuroe had feigned disinterest with the whole affair—but in truth, she was more obsessed with winning than anyone else.

"...That's pretty cute, actually," he whispered, his cheeks turning red.

"What?"

"No, it's nothing," he murmured, clearing his throat.

Shionji, however, having finally grasped the situation, fixed him with a baleful glare. "Y-you Garden clowns! You dirty cheats! Is this how badly you want to win this time around?! Argh! Now I see why you're wearing that uniform! You

shrewd witch!” Shionji shouted, his hands trembling as he pointed venomously at Mushiki.

“Eh?”

The headmaster of the opposing school must have concluded that Saika had enrolled as a student for the express purpose of winning the exhibition match.

The other visiting teachers likewise shook with anger.

“How despicable...! The Witch of Resplendent Color? More like the Witch of Resplendent Evil!”

“Damn... That’s a low, filthy act!”

“...Um, actually...”

They all seemed to have completely misunderstood.

There was a very different reason for why Mushiki had enrolled in the Garden in the guise of Saika...but he could hardly explain that publicly. He crossed his arms as he debated with himself what to do now.

Then, as though having sensed his need for help, Ruri stepped forward.

“Ruri...”

“Leave this to me,” she declared, confident that she could handle the situation.

Mushiki, glad to entrust her with this tussle, nodded in gratitude.

However—

“What’s all that you’ve been saying just now? So you grown men and women are going to chitter and chirp like a bunch of baby chicks? The whole point of this exhibition match is to improve the skills of our schools’ mages. Are you going to cry foul when an annihilation factor you can’t control rears its head? Are you going to tell *it* how it’s *breaking the rules*? Some mages really are clueless, aren’t they?”

“Wh-what...?!”

She didn’t help at all. Far from smoothing this predicament over, she merely fanned the flames.

Maybe she was angry about the disparaging comments directed at Saika. Her remarks just then had struck Mushiki as harsher than usual... But he did feel a little better to have her come to his aid like this.

But it was also unmistakable that her comments had everyone onstage on a knife-edge. At this rate, the opening ceremony could well descend into a death match before the main event.

At that moment—

“Excuse me.”

A figure approached to break the tense atmosphere—Kuroe.

“...Who are you?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Headmaster Shionji. My name is Kuroe Karasuma. I am Lady Saika’s attendant,” she said with utmost politeness. Then she gently added, “The confusion our guests from the Tower feel is entirely justified... Lady Saika is constantly giving me unreasonable tasks as well. I understand what you all must be thinking.”

“Hmm...” Shionji groaned, as though unsure how to respond to this polite greeting.

Kuroe, not about to let this opportunity pass her by, continued, “To that end, the Garden would like to offer a proposal.”

“A proposal?”

“Yes... Lady Saika will only participate in the match after two other students have dropped out, and she’ll restrain herself to only using her first substantiation; how does that sound?”

“...!” Shionji’s eyes opened wide. “Do you really mean that?”

“Of course. Don’t we, Lady Saika?” Kuroe said, turning to Mushiki to press him for his agreement.

As far as he was concerned, if that was what she wanted, he wasn’t about to object.

“Ah,” he replied, offering her a firm nod.

“...” Shionji fell deep into thought for a long moment, before eventually raising his head. “Very well. I must admit I’m still somewhat reluctant, but Knight Fuyajoh here did have a point... Though, I do have one condition.”

“Please,” Mushiki urged.

“I want you to wait ten minutes until you see *our* representatives.”

“Hmm...?”

Mushiki, not sure what to make of this, glanced Kuroe’s way out of the corner of his eye. She in turn gave him a slight nod, as if to say that shouldn’t pose an issue.

“All right. I have no objection.”

“...Then let’s resume this conversation in ten minutes,” Shionji said, before leading his two aides down the stage and disappearing into the back of the hall.

After seeing him off, Mushiki tilted his head slightly. “Ten minutes... I wonder what he’s going to do?”

“He will, most likely, change one or more of their representatives for the match. Probably to someone who will be able to specialize in countering Lady Saika,” Kuroe mumbled.

“I see,” Mushiki answered, rubbing his chin.

Then, ten minutes later—

“Now, it’s time to introduce the representatives from the Tower,” Silvelle’s voice echoed over the loudspeakers.

Shionji and the other teachers still hadn’t returned to the stage.

“Takeru Matsuba, third year.”

“Oh!”

A male student from the Tower jumped up onstage as his name was called, wild cheers spurring him forward.

But the problems started from there.

“Next, filling in for Shou Negishi, third year...we have Tetsuga Suoh, first year.”

“I’m here!”

As he heard the sound of that familiar name echoing in his ears, Mushiki’s eyes nearly bulged from their sockets.

Glancing down, appearing before him was none other than one of the teachers who had disappeared from the stage earlier.

No... There was a slight difference about him.

“...Huh?”

Mushiki was dumbfounded.

But his response wasn’t unreasonable. After all, that stern man in his mid-thirties whose body was covered in countless scars was now wearing the uniform of a Tower student. It clearly didn’t fit his huge frame, and the back looked like it had been repaired using a considerable amount of duct tape.

The instructor, however, seemed completely unconcerned as he took his position among his school’s representatives with pride. The sleeves of his uniform, barely managing to maintain their shape, all but screamed aloud in their struggle to contain his thick, log-like arms.

“Leave it to me! I’ll take care of these try-hards!” he declared with an innocent grin.

He was clearly projecting a different persona from the man who he had been just a few minutes earlier. Perhaps this was his attempt at adopting a youthful flair?

“Filling in for Mako Shimbashi, third year... Wakaba Saeki, first year.”

“Yahoo!”

Next, another of Shionji’s aides, Wakaba Saeki, leaped onstage.

Mushiki had a bad feeling even before hearing that introduction—and just as he’d expected, this teacher, too, was now wearing the Tower’s uniform for female students.

“...”

The sight of this mysterious mature lady in a uniform bursting at the seams

had a different kind of destructive power than that of Suoh. Gasps were heard throughout the hall.

“Whoa...”

“It’s like she went to one of those shady clothing shops...”

“Damn, that looks sexy on her...”

Nonetheless, the individual in question didn’t seem at all bothered by these reactions, glancing at her admirers through cute, upturned eyes.

“Aiight, so this exhibition match is totes going to be bomb, like seriously! Let’s kick ‘em to the curb!” she said in some mysterious language.

Was that another attempt at coming across as a teenager? Mushiki couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Silvelle soon launched into her next announcement. *“Filling in for Haruki Kuwazome, third year... Gyousei Shionji, first year.”*

“Yo!”

Just as Mushiki had feared, this next voice belonged to none other than Tower’s headmaster, Gyousei Shionji.

Of course, he, too, was now wearing a student’s school uniform.

“I’ve never tried anything like this before...but I’ll do my best!”

“Wh-what?!” Ruri blurted out in astonishment.

She stood just before Mushiki and pointed with her arm outstretched at the Tower’s representatives (as the teaching staff had now styled themselves as students).

“Heh... Is there a problem? We’re just three wet-behind-the-ears first-years freshly enrolled at the Tower. Why should the other side’s little ploy be tolerated and not ours...? It would be beyond hypocritical for *you all* to complain, wouldn’t you say?” Shionji declared. He and his two fellow teachers broke out in amused chortles.

The young man at the very head of the group, the only real student among

them, looked ill at ease.

...This was turning into a downright mess, but when all was said and done, what they were doing wasn't all that different from the Garden's selection. So long as Saika herself was representing the Garden, they would have no choice but to accept this arrangement. Though on tenterhooks at this development, Mushiki gave the opposing side his assent.

"W-well... I suppose the conditions aren't all that different. We'll allow it. But..."

"But what?"

"Aren't there supposed to be five representatives? What happened to the last one?"

Shionji smirked. "An excellent question. Our last entrant is a treasured daughter of the Tower, the most powerful killer purposefully selected to bring down your Garden."

"Your treasured daughter...?"

"Indeed. And her name is...," Shionji began to say, when—

"Me!" came a voice from out of nowhere as a fifth figure leaped onstage, spinning through the air then landing with an extravagant pose.

"...! You...!" Mushiki's eyes all but popped from their sockets.

Her flashy dyed hair was tied up in two pigtails, her canines poked through her lips, and she was wearing ear cuffs in various sizes.

Yes—this was none other than Clara Tokishima, the popular MagiTube streamer Clara.

But there was one difference from how Mushiki remembered her—she was now sporting the same uniform as Shionji and the others.

"Phew, I finally found you. The Garden's Madam Witch," she said, her head swaying as she glanced up to meet Mushiki's gaze.

"..."

He knit his brows. The emotions reflected in her eyes were distinctly different

from the times when he had interacted with her in his own body.

“Clara?! That uniform...?! You’re with the Tower...?!” Ruri wheezed in astonishment.

The next moment, her name and photograph appeared on the overhead projector with perfect timing.

“You’re the Tower’s...last...representative...?” Mushiki asked warily.

Shionji clapped his hands together. “That’s right. She’s our secret weapon! Just as strong an asset as your own Ruri Fuyajoh...!”

Clara glanced up at the screen. “Ah. By the way,” she said lightly. “I came here a little early to scout the place out. Still, well, er, that doesn’t matter right now. More importantly...”

She paused, picking up the microphone onstage and pointing with her arm outstretched straight at Mushiki.

Then, in a loud, clear voice resonating amid the rows of students and teaching staff from the Garden and the Tower alike, she proclaimed:

“Madam Witch! Let’s see which of us is worthy of being Mushiki’s girlfriend! I challenge you to a duel!”

“...What?”

Mushiki, caught square in her firing line, could do nothing more than gawk at this sudden declaration.

Chapter 3

[SHOWDOWN]

➤ Madam Witch vs. Clara, a Three-Round Match for Love ➤

Throughout human history, two main themes have constantly risen above the rest.

The first is struggle.

The second, romance.

Since the dawn of time, people have always been enthralled by tales of gallant heroism, their hearts stirred by the words of beautiful love stories.

No matter the turning of the ages, irrespective of the extent of technological innovation and changes in the world, these two fixations have remained unchanged.

That is to be expected. After all, both pleasures are rooted in the fundamental desire for human beings to live and connect with others.

So long as people live in the midst of social groups, they are obliged to compete with one another to protect their lives, their friends, their properties, and to find reproductive partners in order to beget offspring.

But of course, in real life, it is quite unlikely that each of these challenges will turn out exactly as one might hope.

And yet—no, for that very reason—people tend to let themselves get carried away, fascinated by stories of a mysterious *other* that makes their blood gush with excitement, pulled along by romantic tales of beauty and ugliness.

The mages in this hidden corner of the world were no exception—they, too, were merely human.

So in short...

This situation encompassing both of these gripping elements—two skilled mages competing against one another for the sake of love—couldn't fail to rouse an outpouring of passion.

"...We're in trouble now...," Mushiki murmured.

"We certainly are...," Kuroe added.

The two of them grumbled under their breath as they returned to the headmistress's office, their expressions strained.

Well, strictly speaking, it was only Mushiki who wore a bitter expression—Kuroe was as expressionless as ever. It was clear, nonetheless, that beneath that visage, she was indeed deeply troubled by what had happened.

Of course, the source of their mutual consternation was none other than Clara.

Around thirty minutes ago, as the Tower's final representative for the interschool demonstration battle, she had stood up onstage and proposed a public showdown between her and Saika, with Mushiki as the spoils.

"It's all over WeSPER. It's already trending," Kuroe said as she glanced at her phone screen.

"WeSPER?" Mushiki repeated uncertainly.

"Another social networking service exclusive to mages. Unlike the last one I showed you, this one is for publishing short posts for other users to see," she explained, showing him her phone display.

An article titled *The Witch of Resplendent Color vs. Clara, Showdown for Love?!* jumped out at him, followed by more comments than the eye could count... As was to be expected of modern-day magicians, they had taken to sharing information in a very contemporary way.

"Why didn't you turn her down more clearly?" Kuroe asked.

“...I’m sorry...” Mushiki moaned, raising a hand to his forehead.

Although everyone was taken aback, Clara had persisted with her challenge, and before he knew it, the conversation seemed settled—at least in the eyes of everyone who was watching.

Even though he hadn’t exactly given her a concrete response, everyone was acting as though the duel was decided. In fact, the entire Garden was already bursting with rumors and speculation.

“...But if I had said I didn’t know what she was talking about, Clara probably would have claimed victory then and there and insisted that I belong to her...”

“You...may be right...” Kuroe sighed.

Mushiki let out a heavy breath as well.

Everything really had gone haywire. To think that he had been challenged to a *duel for Mushiki*, a fight over himself... What was he supposed to do? It was like being faced with a philosophical conundrum.

He was still deep in thought when Kuroe glanced at him, her face lighting up with an idea. “How about this—you publicly declare that you and Mushiki won’t allow Clara to come between you two. If both Lady Saika and Mushiki are unanimous, Clara won’t—”

“I can’t do that!” he found himself shouting.

Kuroe stared back in surprise, and he fought to calm his heaving shoulders. “I’m sorry,” he said. “For shouting like that. And for my tone...”

“It doesn’t matter. Go ahead, tell me in whatever way is most comfortable for you. There’s no one here but us,” Kuroe urged.

Mushiki bowed. “Yes, I’m in Saika’s body right now. As far as most people are concerned, anything I say is practically the word of Saika herself. So if I did that, Clara *could* give up quietly. There’s that possibility at least.” Nonetheless, he clenched his fists. “Still, I’m just borrowing her body, looking after it for a while. I can’t ignore her wishes or do anything that could affect her future life... Especially when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“...”

Kuroe fell silent for a moment, before letting out a soft sigh. “I see. That was thoughtless of me. I apologize.”

“...! No, you don’t need to...” Mushiki paused, his eyes widening.

Behind her expressionless mask, Kuroe’s face seemed to have relaxed slightly.

“Kuroe... Is that a smile?”

“What are you talking about?” she deflected, averting her gaze, returning to her usual placid look.

She soon regained her composure and peered straight into his eyes. “In that case, we will have to consider our response carefully. Clara’s comments have already taken off among the staff and students both at the Garden and the Tower. Of course, from Lady Saika’s point of view, they can be ignored, but...”

“That wouldn’t be like Saika, though... Would it?”

“Precisely.” Kuroe nodded in agreement. “Fortunately, Lady Saika has yet to say anything definite. Thus far, only Clara herself has suggested that Lady Saika has feelings for Mushiki. Lady Saika has effectively just been caught in the middle. But even so, it wouldn’t be like her to run from a challenge.”

She paused for a moment, before adding, “Lady Saika would be amused by the provocation and accept it head-on, then defeat her opponent with ease. As for the implication that Lady Saika is Mushiki’s girlfriend, that accusation was only made by Clara without any form of corroboration. If Lady Saika wins, she shouldn’t be obliged to do or admit anything. She was simply accepting Clara’s challenge... However, if Clara loses, given that she initiated all this, no doubt she will have to give up on Mushiki.”

“...I see.” He nodded as he rose from his chair. “That does sound...like *me*,” he said in Saika’s voice as he looked himself over in the mirror.

Kuroe nodded in agreement.

“...Well, I can’t say I really understand the meaning of fighting over yourself, though,” Mushiki chuckled.

“Let’s not go too far,” Kuroe remarked with a noticeable lack of amusement as she tapped at the screen of her phone. “Pre-event festivities are currently

taking place throughout the Garden in advance of the match tomorrow... It seems that Clara is setting up a special stage for her confrontation with Lady Saika. She has even put in an official application to use the multipurpose hall.”

“Well, well. She’s a fast one, isn’t she?” Mushiki continued, still adopting Saika’s personality. “She doesn’t have the slightest doubt I’ll turn down her challenge.”

“Perhaps she hasn’t considered that possibility, or she might think Lady Saika is obligated to accept... Either way, she’ll be a bothersome opponent. Even so —”

“Let’s go, Kuroe. We’ll of course snatch victory and then make a triumphant return. No matter the battle, Saika Kuozaki would never run away or accept defeat.”

“Indeed. I’ll accompany you.” Kuroe nodded in satisfaction as the two of them approached the door at the back of the headmistress’s room.

The doorway was on the back wall, at the far end of the top floor of the central school building. Normally, one would have expected it to lead to thin air, perhaps intended as a joke by the architects or builders, or a trap to lead the unwitting into a steep fall.

Nonetheless, when Kuroe gripped the knob and swung the door open, it wasn’t the emptiness outside the building that appeared before them.

“After you,” she urged.

“Thank you,” Mushiki said, passing through at a leisurely pace.

Kuroe followed a second later, closing the door behind them.

The two of them had stepped out into the multipurpose building in the Garden’s western precinct.

At the other end of the hall was a large stage, before which an audience was spread out in a wide arc.

The seats were already fully occupied, taken up by students in the uniforms of both the Garden and the Tower.

And in front of them all—

“Hiya there! Thanks for coming, everyone! Your good friend Clara is just gonna wait here onstage until Madam Witch decides to show her face! How’s that sound?”

Standing in the eye of that whirlpool was none other than the mage Clara Tokishima, speaking into a microphone to enliven the atmosphere.

On closer inspection, Mushiki could see her winged smartphone floating nearby, just as it had been when she had gone to subdue the slimes. This had to be another of her live streams.

Then—

“Yowza?!” she exclaimed, her eyes shooting open.

It didn’t take much thought to guess what must have prompted this.

After all, at that moment, Clara’s and Mushiki’s gazes met.

She broke out in a broad grin and, with an exaggerated gesture, urged her audience to take in their new visitors.

“Everyone, take a look at our guests! The headmistress of Void’s Garden, the strongest mage in the whole wide world—Saika Kuozaki herself!”

“...!”

As prompted, the audience turned as one toward Mushiki—and the building erupted in a round of thunderous applause and earth-shattering cheers.

He felt more than a little self-conscious, but without stepping out of character as Saika, he gave the hall a graceful wave.

Then, at a relaxed pace, he made his way through the aisle and approached the stage.

“Madam Witch!”

Just before he could step into the limelight, he heard a familiar voice coming from nearby.

He glanced around for a second. “Ah, Ruri. And Hizumi, too. Have you come to watch this little bout?”

Indeed, Ruri and Hizumi were both there, looking restless in their seats in the

front row.

“Yes. That Clara woman... It wasn’t enough for her to strut about with that boyfriend nonsense, and now she had to drag you into this, too...! I wish I could crush her myself... But she’s challenged *you*, Madam Witch, so I won’t rob you of that right,” Ruri said, shaking her fist.

Then, in her agitated voice, she added, “Please, give that insolent woman a taste of what she deserves!”

“Ha-ha. I’ve been handed a major role to play, haven’t I? Well, I’ll do my best,” he said somewhat lightly. That seemed the closest to a Saika-like response.

Ruri seemed to have a similar take on the situation. She nodded in response, her stern face conveying her trust and agreement. “By the way, Madam Witch...”

“What is it?”

“Clara was just mouthing off, right? When she said the match was to see who’s worthy of being Mushiki’s girlfriend?” she asked, her expression composed of 99 percent trust and 1 percent concern.

For a moment, Mushiki was at a loss for an answer, but he nodded in response.

“...Th-that’s right. For some reason, she seems to think if she can beat me, she’ll be able to date him.”

“I thought so! There’s no way Madam Witch would be into my brother!” Ruri said, her face lighting up.

“...”

...Well, that *was* the impression he had set out to convey, but to hear someone say it so bluntly made the words reverberate through his whole body. He did his best to maintain his calm facade and offered an ambiguous response.

Then, from a seat on the other side of the aisle, a dry chuckle rang out.

“Hee-hee-hee, so you’re planning to teach her a lesson? Let’s see how well that works out, eh?”

Seated not too far away was an older man, complete with white hair and beard, wearing the uniform of a Tower student.

There was only one individual who fit that description— Gyousei Shionji, the headmaster of the Tower and a fresh-faced first-year student. Looking closely, Tetsuga Suoh and Wakaba Saeki were similarly dressed in crisp school uniforms by his side.

“Master Shionji? And your lackeys, too? So you’re still dressing up like that?”

“Still? It’s only natural for students at the Tower to wear their uniform.”

“Yes, well, I suppose that’s true...”

“It’s also natural for freshmen like us to support Tokishima, too. She’s our senior, after all.”

“Your senior?”

“Isn’t that how students refer to those in higher grades?” Shionji asked, his head tilted to one side.

The word might have made sense in some situations, but it certainly didn’t feel right coming from the mouth of a gentleman so advanced in age.

Suddenly, Ruri, no doubt having overheard all this, shouted from her seat across the aisle, “Headmaster Shionji, are you really going to let her get away with this? She’s already made a huge mess of things.”

“I have no issue with it. At the Tower, we respect the autonomy of our students.”

“...And your *real* reason?”

“That firecracker of a girl doesn’t listen to anyone, but at least this way she might be able to exhaust the Garden’s strength a little before the match—”

“ ...”

“Ahem.” He shrugged, averting his gaze. “Well done, Knight Fuyajoh. You managed to extract an improper remark from me.”

“No... I didn’t do anything...,” Ruri responded with hesitation.

...It sounded like the Tower had its hands full with Clara, too, then...

But that didn't mean Mushiki could tuck his tail between his legs and admit defeat.

Because right now, he *wasn't* Mushiki. As Saika Kuozaki, it was his responsibility to defend the name of the Garden.

"..."

With renewed determination, he approached the stage with Kuroe by his side to confront the waiting Clara.

"Oh-ho-ho... So you came, Madam Witch...? I was actually a little worried about what I'd do if you just up and ignored me. *That* would have been seriously awkward. So I s'pose I owe you one?" she said with a dauntless grin.

Incidentally, Clara whispered the second half of that greeting. She was certainly a headache, but it was hard to hate her sense of tact at least.

"But a match is a match! I'll beat you, Madam Witch, and win Mushipi's heart for myself!" she declared, pointing at him with an exaggerated flourish.

No one, least of all any student of the Garden, would dare talk to the Witch of Resplendent Color in that way. For better or for worse, Clara clearly had considerable pluck.

"..."

Mushiki glanced at Kuroe, who was standing slightly behind him.

Then, having guessed what he hoped to ask, she offered him a short nod.

Mushiki forced a soft smile, turned back to Clara, and declared loudly, "Oh-ho, I'll humor you. I won't shy away from this challenge. I'll defeat you, which I suppose would qualify *me* to be Mushiki's lover."

At this pronouncement, the entire hall began to buzz with excitement.

Of course, he didn't really mean all that (though personally, he would have loved for it to be true).

However, if Saika was to ever find herself in this kind of situation, the most typical course of action for her would be to attempt to brighten up the situation—to effortlessly defeat her foe, take the spoils for her own, and leave with a

stinging remark along the lines of: *That was fun.*

Mushiki had no doubt that the real Saika Kuozaki would have done just that.

As it happened, Kuroe had agreed with his assessment, and Ruri, watching from the front row, didn't seem at all surprised by how he had chosen to deal with this call to arms.

If anything, she even went so far as to lean over to the astonished Hizumi, seated beside her, and explain, "Hee-hee, calm down. Madam Witch is just working the crowd."

Strictly speaking, Mushiki hadn't been able to make out her exact words, but he was certain that was the sort of thing she would have just murmured. He had an extremely high success rate at gauging his sister's reactions.

Clara, on the other hand, wore an expression that all but said: *Huh? Is Madam Witch really gunning for Mushipi, after all...?*

It seemed she still had only a shallow understanding of Saika Kuozaki.

"So what kind of match is this going to be? A mock battle? What level substantiation shall we go up to?"

"H-h-hold on...," Clara mouthed, spreading her hands wide as though put on the spot. "Um, hang on a sec, let's save that for tomorrow's party! You're such a tease, Madam Witch ☆," she said with a myriad of cute gestures.

Nonetheless, she couldn't hide the fact that her forehead was dripping with sweat.

Her anxiety was only natural. She clearly wasn't confident about winning a one-on-one mock battle against Saika.

"Then why did you issue your challenge?"

"Um, you see—"

"One moment. I'll take over from here—to adjudicate."

Before Clara could finish her sentence, the center of the stage let out a bright burst of light as a young girl appeared before the audience—the Garden's administrative AI, Silvelle.

“Huh?! Wow! Isn’t she that AI girl?” Clara exclaimed.

“Silvelle?” Mushiki whispered.

“Yoo-hoo! Oh, Saachie! Just call me Sis like you always do! ≡”

Silvelle shuddered, as though the sound of her full name made her feel uncomfortable—and with that movement, her ample breasts swayed from side to side, triggering a volley of audible gasps from the audience.

According to Kuroe, the AI was abnormally peculiar about being addressed as *Sis*, and it seemed that rule held true even with Saika.

“*Saachie...*” Mushiki let the sweet sound roll around his mouth.

...Right. So even Saika had a cute nickname.

He felt a thrill course through him at the discovery of this heretofore unseen side belonging to the target of his affections.

But if he let himself get too excited, he would risk reverting to his own body. Taking a deep breath, he worked to calm himself, before turning to Silvelle.

“Ah yes, that’s right, Sis... So what are you doing here?”

“If you’re going to have a match, you need a neutral third party to set the rules, no? That’s where everyone’s favorite big sister Silvelle comes in! Or do you want to let Clarin decide everything?” Silvelle asked questioningly.

So her nickname for Clara was *Clarin*...?

“Hmm...”

Well, she was right. If they were going to compete against one another, they would need a moderator and referee. And if Clara was allowed to decide the rules by herself, she would no doubt choose something that gave her the upper hand.

Nonetheless, it wouldn’t be like Saika to disagree with this proposal.

“I don’t mind,” he responded with a soft, confident smile.

“Oh-ho, you’re always so cool, Saachie! I love it!” Silvelle said. *“As the Garden’s big sister responsible for watching over everyone here, I can’t overlook an unfair match. Is that okay, Clarin?”*

“Um, yes. I’ll let you decide. I mean, if you don’t win fairly, it isn’t a true victory, you know? Not that I was planning anything dishonest, okay? It’s all about fair play, don’cha think?”

“Very well. Then, unworthy as I am, I, Silvelle, will stand witness to this match between Saachie and Clarin here. You’re both my cute little sisters, so it’s painful to have to watch you fight each other, but I’ll be here to console the loser, all right?” the AI said with a gentle smile.

Although Clara was a student of the Tower, she didn’t seem to have any issue playing along with Silvelle’s sister act.

“Now, please allow me to explain the rules. The match will be divided into three rounds. Once we reach the end, the entrant with the most points will be declared the winner... And the first round will be the ultimate cooking duel! The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach!”

With Silvelle’s announcement, dramatic audio blasted through the hall’s loudspeakers and the stage lit up with a spectacle of special lighting effects, the name of the challenge appearing on the projected screen. The production quality and use of equipment were impeccable.

“A cooking showdown...?”

“Yes. People always say that the strongest relationships between men and women are forged through the stomach. Cooking requires a multitude of skills, so in this round, Saachie and Clarin will show off their culinary prowess.”

“Hmm... So how will the winner be decided?” Mushiki asked.

Silvelle gave him a firm nod. *“Of course, we’ll be asking our special judge.”*

“Special judge?”

“Mukkie.”

“Bah?!”

Mushiki choked violently at Silvelle’s response—leaving the audience watching abuzz at this unusual scene and Kuroe glaring at him from behind.

But his reaction wasn’t unreasonable. After all, he was already present as Saika. Given that this competition was ostensibly meant to win his heart, having

him judge the results might certainly seem fair, and yet...

No doubt, imagining Mushiki's response to her food, Clara's lips curled into a fearless grin. "Mwah-ha-ha, what's the matter, Madam Witch? Is there something wrong with letting Mushipi decide? Maybe you're worried about your ability to whip up something tasty?"

"That's not it...," he demurred, his expression strained.

Lowering his voice, he glanced over his shoulder. "Kuroe...is that possible?"

"If you undergo a state conversion immediately after preparing the food, it shouldn't be *impossible*... Though contrary to Silvelle's intentions here, I do think it's extremely unfair," she murmured, looking somewhat dissatisfied with it all.

He had sensed it before, but her unexpected obsession with winning struck him with renewed force. It was probably second nature for her to want to confront her foes in a fair and aboveboard manner.

He had thought he had understood all aspects of her personality, as he had to pose as her every day—but here she was showing him a side of herself he hadn't yet witnessed. She was truly a terrifying woman—and cute, too.

"Well... That's true. No doubt *my* food would taste a hundred times better to Mushiki's palate. But this does put me at a disadvantage to Clara."

"Huh? What makes you say that?" Kuroe asked.

"Hmm? What do you mean? It doesn't?"

"...If the player and the judge are one and the same, you can freely decide the outcome regardless of the food's quality," Kuroe whispered.

Mushiki's eyes snapped open in surprise. "You're a genius."

"What kept you from thinking of that yourself?"

"My head was filled with the words *home cooking*... There isn't room for anything else..."

"..."

Kuroe looked stunned for a moment. "Well, I'll leave you to it, then," she said

with a nod.

“Now, let’s get the venue ready,” Silvelle said with a snap of her fingers, having seemingly decided that everything was settled.

Of course, being just a three-dimensional projection, she didn’t actually have fingers to snap—but nonetheless, an audible click sounded from the hall’s loudspeakers.

With that, the stage slid open as a platform began to rise up from the basement.

“...Is this...?”

Mushiki frowned at the sheer suddenness of this development.

It wasn’t long before two well-equipped kitchen sets, complete with shelves stuffed full of ingredients, appeared onstage.

“Whoa! This is awesome!” Clara swayed from side to side, her eyes gleaming—and as she did so, her flying smartphone darted around to capture the range of foodstuffs.

How on earth did that device even operate?

Silvelle puffed out her chest with pride. *“I prepared for this eventuality ahead of time. Please feel free to use the food and facilities. We also have aprons, so don’t hold back,”* she said, indicating the countertop, where as promised, there was indeed a neatly folded kitchen apron.

“Oh, awesome! It’s the small details that make a world of difference, you know?” Clara said, cheerfully wrapping the apron around her waist.

The fabric was adorned with a strange mascot, a creature that somehow resembled both a kitten and a skeleton at the same time. Looking carefully, it seemed to be the exact same character on Clara’s hair ornaments.

Incidentally, Mushiki’s apron was emblazoned with the kanji for *Resplendent Color* and was dyed in a wide range of hues... Silvelle might have intended for the two items to match their respective personalities, but his apron was much more eccentric or surrealistic in design.

“Now, are you both ready? The theme is One Dish to Please Mukkie, and the

time limit is sixty minutes. Are the contestants ready? Well then—Battle Start!”

Silvelle made a finger-gun gesture and then: *Poof!* The bang of a starting pistol echoed through the hall.

“Hi, yoo-hoo! I’ve gotta win first!”

Clara didn’t waste so much as a moment before hitting the ground running toward the pantry area, before proceeding to throw ingredients into a basket seemingly at random.

Was her strategy to monopolize all the best items first to limit Saika’s available options? Or was she really intending to use all that?

At this stage, he couldn’t claim to understand her intentions, but only pray that they weren’t the latter.

“Hmm...”

A few seconds after her, Mushiki likewise picked up his basket and headed for the pantry area.

Although it had nothing to do with the match, Mushiki looked at himself wearing an apron and carrying a basket in his hands, and this new Saika struck him as the spitting image of a newlywed bride. He would have to make sure to watch the recording of Clara’s live stream later.

“...No, not now.”

It wasn’t the time for such thoughts. He shook his head, hoping to clear his mind.

In the eyes of everyone watching, he *was* Saika. More important than winning or losing, he was determined not to do anything that could drag her reputation into disrepute.

Well, a clumsy Saika fumbling around the kitchen would be endearing in its own way—but it was better not to contemplate such thoughts for the time being.

“Right... Let’s take this...and that,” he murmured, tossing various ingredients into his basket.

“...This is bad,” Ruri moaned, her worry writ large on her face as she watched from her seat in the audience.

“What’s bad...?” Hizumi asked from beside her.

“...The type of match,” Ruri answered without taking her eyes off the scene in front of her. “If it was a battle using magic, there isn’t anyone in the world who could beat her. But Madam Witch doesn’t do a lot of cooking by herself.”



“Whaaat? Then that means...”

“...Yes. Clara’s brimming with confidence. She might actually be a decent cook.”

“Hee-hee-hee... Bwah-ha-ha-ha!”

Ruri’s apprehension was plain to see—but across the aisle, Shionji let out a raucous guffaw.

“I see, I see. I didn’t realize the Garden had such a glaring weakness. Shall we see her defeated as a prelude to tomorrow’s battle, then?” he scoffed, already seemingly assured of victory.

“Ngh...” Ruri pulled a bitter face.

But at that moment—

“Oh, Saachie is getting to work. Look how steady her hand is. She’s peeling the potatoes, cutting them into quarters...and she hasn’t forgotten to bevel the edges, either! It’s a small detail but one that makes all the difference in the finished product!”

“Huh...?” Shionji’s smile froze over as Silvelle’s commentary echoed throughout the room.

“Eh?” Ruri stared agape.

Next, it was Clara’s voice that rang out. “Hmm...? You look like you know what you’re doing, Madam Witch! But Clara here isn’t about to throw in the towel! It’s time for my secret technique—Yamata no Orochi!” she said, crossing her arms in front of her face.

Bottles of various spices and seasonings were sandwiched between each of her fingers, numbering eight in total. The powders danced through the air in line with her movements.

“Ugh... A-a-achoo!”

“Oooh, Clarin, isn’t that a little much? But it’s so cute, acting a little careless like that! You’ve earned cute little sister points!”

Clara’s sneeze followed by Silvelle’s play-by-play had the audience roaring

with laughter.

“...Um...”

“...”

Her eyebrows raised, Ruri glanced at Shionji, only to see him holding his head in his hands as he leaned forward in his chair.

Pretending not to have noticed, she turned back to the stage with a grin.

“Well... She seems okay. Madam Witch really is cooking like a normal person,” Hizumi murmured with a sigh of relief.

Ruri, however, stroked her chin with a serious look. “Yes... This is a lucky miscalculation. But there’s still at least one big problem.”

“A-a big problem...? What do you mean...?” Hizumi asked, catching her breath.

“There are two ways to make sense of this. Either she’s a perfect Madam Witch who’s actually good at cooking...or she’s a hardworking Madam Witch who has been practicing her cooking in secret... And both options are endearing in their own way...,” she said in all honesty.

“...You know, I envy your way of thinking sometimes,” Hizumi muttered weakly.

“Okay, it’s finished,” Mushiki called out.

“We’re done over here, too!” Clara added.

At that moment, a buzzer sounded to announce the end of the first round.

“Good work, Saachie, Clarin. I was moved to tears watching my two little sisters working so hard... Now then, let’s bring in the judge before the food gets cold. Mukkie?” Silvelle called out.

Naturally, there was no way Mushiki could answer her.

And so he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and pressed it against his ear.

“Hello...? Hmm, I see. Got it. I’ll be right there.”

With that little charade out of the way, he turned to Silvelle and Clara.

“I’m sorry, but there’s some business I need to attend to. I’ll be right back, so please start judging the dishes.”

“Business? Did something happen?” Clara inquired.

“Ah yes. Apparently the world will be in terrible danger if I don’t act.”

“That sounds pretty serious!” Clara exclaimed with shock.

Mushiki waved his hands to reassure her. “Yes, it’s a *very* serious situation. It might take me...around twenty minutes to resolve...? Besides, I’m sure Mushiki will be more comfortable sharing his thoughts without me breathing down his neck,” he added as a joke.

Clara, clearly on edge, whistled as she let out her breath. “Huh... Why do you hafta be so cool?”

He had simply meant to give a plausible excuse, but Clara seemed to have taken it as a provocation. He just hoped it wouldn’t sound strange if Saika left the hall.

“In that case, I’ll be back soon... Kuroe, would you come with me?” he called after her.

“Yes.”

With that, the two of them made their way backstage.

A few seconds later—

“...”

Mushiki Kuga, in his original form, followed Kuroe nervously back the way that they had come.

Indeed. Within a minute of approaching the secluded space behind the stage, he had forcefully undergone a state conversion from his Saika mode to his Mushiki one.

It had happened so fast that he felt a little embarrassed.

...Still, he did think Kuroe’s actions were somewhat underhanded, pushing him up against the wall and whispering in his ear, “I’ll teach you how to wear a bra.” There was no way he could possibly resist such an assault. If this had been

a formal competition, that would have been a clear breach of the rules. He would have to request a video recording to keep as evidence.

“Mushipiii! I’ve been waiting for you! Did you see how brave your Clara was?”

The moment he showed himself onstage, Clara blew him a kiss. He forced a smile as he waved back.

The audience was booing him at the top of their lungs, but he just didn’t care anymore. If anything, he was more terrified of Ruri, shooting him a murderous glare from the front row.

“Now, Mukkie, please take a seat here,” Silvelle said, urging him to sit down.

He did as instructed, taking the chair that had just appeared at the back of the kitchen set.

“It’s time to judge our two contestants. Let’s start with Saachie’s dish!” the AI announced, quickly lifting her hand into the air.

With that signal, Kuroe stepped forward holding a tray covered with a domed silver lid.

“Since Lady Saika is currently absent, I’ll serve her dish in her place,” she said, placing the serving tray in front of him and removing the lid—and all the while, a dramatic drumroll reverberated through the hall. “Enjoy.”

As soon as the lid was removed, a spotlight shone on the tray’s contents, and the tableware seemed to sparkle.

Before him was his own carefully crafted serving of *nikujaga*, a Japanese meat-and-potato stew.

“What a surprise! It’s nikujaga! Meat and potatoes! The taste of home, of childhood, the number one item on any young man’s list of dishes he’d like a prospective girlfriend to cook for him! Saachie, what a surprisingly simple menu! Will this nostalgic taste really melt Mukkie’s heart?!” Silvelle’s voice was overflowing with excitement.

“Um... I guess I’ll dig in.”

Mushiki put his hands together in thanks, picked up his chopsticks, and brought a helping of the stew to his mouth.

A gentle flavor. The rich aroma of good broth. Soft ingredients that still maintained their shape... Everything tasted just as he expected it would.

But that wasn't what mattered right then.

The important thing was that this serving of *nikujaga* was personally prepared by Saika Kuozaki herself.

Of course, he might still have been the one who had selected the ingredients and done the cooking, but that was such a minor detail. The key to all this rested in the imagination. It was a simple fact that Saika's body had put this meal together just for him—and frankly, that was enough.

"Ahhh..."

Mushiki felt a powerful swell of emotions within his chest, and before he knew it, a warm sensation was trickling down his cheeks.

"...Delicious...!"

"Delicious! There you have it! Mukkie has been moved to tears! That's our Saachie! The world's strongest mage is also an outstanding cook!" sounded Silvelle's invigorating voice.

"Wow! Madam Witch!" echoed cries from among the audience.

Even Kuroe, still expressionless, seemed somehow pleased. It was a cute expression.

"Hmm..."

In response to this outpouring of adulation, Clara, not ready to give up, curled her lips. "Madam Witch... You're not lacking as an opponent, but Clara here isn't about to accept defeat!" she declared confidently, bravely placing her own lid-covered tray in front of him.

"..."

Mushiki held his breath.

He had been so focused on his own cooking that he had no idea what she had whipped together.

"Feast your eyes! Clara's very own plat du jour!" she declared, pulling a pose

as she removed the lid with an extravagant flourish.

No doubt, thanks to Silvelle's artistic direction and special effects, the tray lit up with a brilliant glow of light.

Within a few seconds, his vision cleared, revealing...

...A sludgy, incomprehensible broth—or perhaps a stew...

"I-is this...?"

"*Nikujaga*."

"...Huh?!" he shouted, looking startled.

Clara, gauging how to respond to this reaction, crossed her arms and leaned forward. "Ah, I get it. You're surprised. You didn't think Madam Witch and I would compete with the same dish, right? Right? We must have been on the same wavelength, huh?"

"..."

That wasn't why he was so taken aback, but she was so full of confidence that he could hardly tell her the truth. He did his best to sugarcoat his words as he said, "Um... It looks very unique..."

"Oh, you noticed? I was really focusing on the *appearance*. It's basically like a work of art, you know?"

"...What's the theme?"

"*Dreams*...or something like that," she said with a grin.

"..."

He could feel himself breaking out in a cold sweat.

But why? His hands refused to move, as though some bodily instinct rejected the thought of ingesting the *substance* laid out before him.

There was no telling how Clara interpreted his inaction. Nonetheless, she put her hands together with a loud clap and then reached for the spoon.

"Oh, Mushipi! You're such a child! Here, open up!" she said, scooping a spoonful of the *nikujaga* and lifting it to his mouth.

The distinctive aroma of so many miscellaneous spices tickled his nasal passages.

To be honest, he wasn't keen on the idea of tasting it—but if he was supposed to judge this contest, then he had no choice. His body trembling, he forced his mouth slowly open.

"Here goes!" Clara exclaimed brightly and, without hesitation, plunged the spoon into his mouth.

A strange mix, bittersweet but at the same time spicy, burned his tongue. The smell was so pungent that he almost choked.

"...?!"

He could tell, at some vague level, that there was a lump of meat, but he didn't have the courage to bite into it, and so he gulped it down trying as hard as he could not to focus on the flavor.

"Ha... Ha..."

"How is it, Mushipi?! Did you like it?!" Clara asked, her eyes sparkling.

His shoulders heaved as he struggled to breathe. He had to use all his strength to even say the next few words.

"...Wins..."

"Yes?"

"...Saika's...wins..." He gasped, sweat trickling down his face.

"It's decided!" Silvelle squealed with excitement. "Saachie wins the first round! Which gives her a one-point lead!"

She spun about, raising her hand to point to the winner—and the spotlight fell suddenly on Kuroe, sitting in as Saika's substitute.

So by some strange coincidence, it turned out that the real Saika was ultimately given the credit for this victory.

"Good work, everyone! Mukkie, what was the deciding factor for you?"

"...An ordinary kind of love, I guess?"

“I see. Such a deep response.”

It wasn't clear whether Silvelle had understood the true meaning of his words, but she folded her arms and nodded knowingly.

Standing beside them, Clara craned her neck in wonder. “Huh? That's weird. I thought I sprinkled in all the best seasonings...”

“The best seasonings...?”

“Love, I mean! Hee-hee!” she said with a blush.

“...”

Her love, it seemed, was simultaneously sweet, bitter, and spicy.

Why did he feel like he had learned an important lesson about life as an adult?



“...What the hell are those guys even doing?”

In the cafeteria of the central school building, Anviet Svarner, a member of the Garden's teaching staff, was staring at his smartphone's screen with raised eyebrows full of disbelief.

The man was in his mid-twenties and had tan skin and ferocious, beast-like eyes. He had his long hair tied back in a braid. His elegant attire—a well-tailored shirt, vest, and slacks—was punctuated by several sets of gaudy golden accessories.

Regular classes had been canceled for the day to make way for the welcoming ceremony for their guests from the Tower, along with the festivities on the eve of the exhibition match.

Anviet hadn't been able to attend the welcoming event due to other business, but that hadn't stopped rumors of a certain *incident* from reaching him.

It seemed that Saika Kuozaki, the Garden's headmistress, and a female student from the Tower were both fighting over a male student.

It was utterly ridiculous. To be perfectly frank, he had doubted its veracity from the start. And yet—

“Now then, everyone, let’s move on to the second round. Will Saachie, having snatched victory in the first contest, establish a winning streak? Or will Clarin even the score? Don’t look away!”

“ ... ”

Watching the contest being streamed live on MagiTube, Anviet scratched his cheeks as he listened to the audio playing from his phone.

Glancing around the cafeteria, he saw that countless other students who hadn’t been able to grab seats in the multipurpose hall were similarly watching the live video feed on their phones and tablets. If anything, they outnumbered those who had actually come here to eat.

In fact, the number of live viewers displayed at the bottom of the screen had swelled to a level that he had never before seen. Saika was famous, of course—but this MagiTube streamer looked to have a considerable following of her own.

“...What a joke,” he murmured under his breath, before closing the app and shoving his phone back into his pocket. He found the idea of himself watching a video of this caliber on this sort of platform more than he could stomach.

He still had plenty of work that needed to be done. He took a bite of the clubhouse sandwich he had ordered and began to wolf it down, when—

“Wait, seriously?!”

“They’re doing *that* for the second round...?! ”

His ears twitched as the students seated at the tables all around him broke out into conversation.

“I wonder who’ll win...?”

“Is it really okay to stream this, though...?”

“I—I can’t tear my eyes away...”

“ ... ”

...His curiosity got the better of him.

Clicking his tongue in disgust, he snatched his phone once more and tapped the MagiTube icon.

“Oh, there you are, Anviet. I was looking for you.”

“Wha—?!”

But at that moment, a voice called out to him, and he fell forward from shock. The smartphone slipped from his hand and arced through the air, forcing him to chase after it as though practicing a strange dance of some kind.

“...What are you doing?”

The person who had called out to him—Erulka Flaera—watched through narrowed eyes. She clearly wasn’t amused.

Somehow, Anviet managed to catch the device just before it could hit the floor, then sharpening his gaze, he fixed Erulka in a glare.

“Sh-shuddup. What do you think you’re doin’, callin’ out to me like that?! I wasn’t tryin’ to watch the live stream! I was just checkin’ my schedule; you hear me?!”

“No one asked anything about that.”

“Ngh...”



Anviet grunted in frustration, before sitting up straight and turning to face his visitor.

“...So what do you want, Erulka?” he demanded.

“Hmm? Oh, yes.” She nodded, as though having forgotten her reason for reaching out to him. “There’s something I want you to do.”

“Huh? And if I don’t like it?” he spat back with a venomous glower.

Erulka, however, wore a quizzical look. “Oh? Knowing you, I doubt that,” she retorted, fixing him square in her sights.

Judging by her tone, she seemed to honestly believe he couldn’t possibly turn this request down.

“...Tch.”

...This was why he hated dealing with that moldy old mage.

He let out an irritable click of the tongue and cupped his chin in one hand as he motioned for her to continue.



After announcing the winner of the first round—

“Round two...will be all about sharing your true feelings!” Silvelle declared to the audience from the center of the stage.

Incidentally, Clara’s smartphone was floating in front of her a short distance away. As to be expected of two machines, they were operating in perfect tandem.

“Sharing your true feelings...?” Mushiki repeated curiously.

“Yep!” came Silvelle’s enthusiastic response. *“It’s a beautiful thing when two people can understand each other implicitly, but there are some feelings that you can only convey through words and actions! So, Saachie, Clarin—I’m asking you to express your feelings for Mukkie. The time limit is five minutes, so if you need anything, now is your chance to prepare. The winner will be the one who most effectively touches Mukkie’s heart.”*

“I—I see...”

...Given that Mushiki already liked Saika, this second round would probably offer no more real competition than the first one. Even so, he was still nervous.

At that moment, Clara raised her hand. “Yep, yep! Sis! I have a question!”

“What is it, Clarin?”

“Are we allowed to do anything we want? You know, so long as we appeal to him?”

“Yes. You’re free to take any approach you like. Please convey your feelings to Mukkie in the way you find most natural.”

“Hmm... So the one who makes Mushipi’s heart beat faster wins, right?”

“Yes,” Silvelle answered.

“Hmm...” Clara trailed off there, then licked her lips.

“...?! ”

Mushiki found himself shuddering involuntarily at her bewitching expression. He couldn’t pin down the precise cause, but something about her attitude struck him as dangerous.

Silvelle, however, was either unaware of Clara’s gesture just then or else chose to ignore it, and instead she clapped her hands together.

Then, in perfect coordination, the kitchen set and food pantry onstage descended once more below the floor.

“Now, Saachie went first in the last round, so let’s start with Clarin this time... Is there anything you need?”

“Hmm. Right. How about...”

After sinking deep into thought for a moment, Clara whispered something into Silvelle’s ear—though the AI was just a three-dimensional projection, there must have been microphones somewhere nearby to pick up what was said.

“Understood,” she responded. *“I’ll get everything ready.”*

She snapped her fingers—and a large three-seater sofa rose up from beneath the stage.

“How about this?”

“Yep, it’s perfect. Way to go, Sis!”

“Hee-hee-hee.”

Silvelle’s cheeks turned bright red from the compliment, making her look kind of cute.

“All right, Mushipi! Clara here is going to win your heart, so stand right over there!” she said, pointing to the freshly delivered sofa.

“Um...”

Though still concerned about what she might be planning, Mushiki made his way to the couch as instructed.

“The time limit is five minutes. Let’s get started!” Silvelle announced as a buzzer rang out.

A large countdown timer appeared on the overhead projection screen, slowly ticking down to zero.

“Hee-hee-hee, yeah, let’s do this!” Clara approached, her face tinged slightly red. “Hey, Mushipi. I know we just met, but Clara here really likes you, you know...?” she said flirtatiously.

“Whoa...!” echoed countless grief-stricken voices in the audience. *“Oh my god...!”*

But Clara acted as though she couldn’t hear those lamentations and did not shift her gaze once—as if there were no one else present but the two of them.

“...”

She was clearly serious about this, which was quite out of character, given her usual frivolous personality. Her stare pierced him through, and he found himself catching his breath.

“I told you, didn’t I? Clara here, well, I’m the kind of person who goes all out. I’ll do *anything* for you, Mushipi—and I’ll let you do *anything* to me... You don’t believe me? You think I’m just saying all this without meaning it...? Then let me prove it to you.”

“Huh...?”

As Mushiki stared back wide-eyed, Clara’s lips curled into a mysterious smile, her cheeks turning scarlet as she placed a hand on the hem of her skirt.

Then, without warning, she pulled it up at one side.

“Huh... H-hold on... Um...?!”

His vision swirled at this sudden and unexpected development.

The hall was abuzz with excitement. In the corner of his vision, he spotted Ruri, attempting to leap onstage with a terrifying expression—and Hizumi desperately trying to hold her back.

But he didn’t have the luxury of paying attention to them right now.

His whole body stiffened, pinned down by Clara’s movements.

“Hee-hee!”

She seemed to find his reaction amusing, as she rolled her skirt up faster to her thigh.

“Cl-Clara...!” He wheezed, forcing his eyes shut.

Then, as his vision darkened, he heard her laugh. “Mwah-ha-ha! Don’t worry, Mushipi. I’m wearing a swimsuit.”

“A swim—?”

He opened his eyes—and sure enough, peeking out from beneath her skirt was the very same swimsuit she had worn in the video when she had taken a bath with some slimes.

“I’d really love to show you more, but I’m in the middle of a live stream. If I was wearing normal underwear, the video would get taken down, you know? It’s weird, don’t you think? I mean, they show the exact same amount of skin. It’s discrimination against undies if you ask me,” she said absentmindedly.

Mushiki, ill at ease, glanced away. “Y-yeah...”

Well, that certainly was a swimsuit, but as she said, it didn’t look all that much different from actual underwear. It was still powerfully stimulating.

Perhaps having noticed his discomfort, Clara's face relaxed as she broke out into a grin.

"Oh no! Are you embarrassed, Mushipi? You're so cute!" she said jokingly.

With that, she began to loosen her uniform tie and set about undoing the buttons on her blouse one by one.

"...?! Wh-what are you—?"

"Oooh. I'm wearing a swimsuit on top as well, so don't worry. Buuut..."

Pausing there, she took off her school uniform—her pale stomach and breasts hidden behind no more than a flimsy swimsuit.

"...!"

It was a bathing suit, all right—but all the same, it was unbelievable and somehow immoral to see it come to light from under a school uniform. If anything, it would have been more appropriate just to be wearing the swimsuit by itself.

"See? Pretty erotic, don'cha think?" she asked, emphasizing her chest as she drew closer.

Without even realizing it, Mushiki took a half step back.

"Wha—?!"

Before he knew it, he stumbled over, landing flat on his butt with a soft plop.

Yes, this was the sofa that Silvelle had prepared just a moment earlier.

"Ah, perfect. I couldn't have hoped for a better position," Clara said, wriggling her hips to lean into the sofa as though to block his escape route.

The sweet fragrance of her hair and skin as well as her faint breath seemed to caress his every pore.

"..."

Mushiki found himself short of breath, his heart pounding in his chest.

This was getting too dangerous. If he had been in his Saika mode, all this stimulation would have immediately triggered a state conversion back into his

original form.

“Mushipi... If you choose me, I’ll show you *everything*, you know...? Away from the camera, where it’s just the two of us...,” Clara whispered in a sweet, seductive voice as she leaned in closer.

Her cherry-colored lips were directly before him.

“No... N-no... We can’t...”

At that moment, the buzzer sounded throughout the hall.

Her five-minute allocation to appeal to his heart was up.

“And that’s it! Hmm, Clarin, you were so bold there! As your big sister, I think even I felt a slight thrill!” Silvelle said, twisting her body shyly as her cheeks turned red.

With that, the audience let out their collective breath, as though only now remembering that this was all just a contest.

“Well, those five minutes went by pretty quickly, huh? But you know what? I got to see Mushipi acting cute, so I’m happy,” Clara said with a laugh as she jumped down from the sofa.

She still hadn’t buttoned her blouse back up, and a barrage of camera flashes came from the spectators.

“Hmm? Oh yeah! Peace! Double peace!”

Yet when Clara realized how exposed she was, instead of covering her chest, she started posing for the photographers. A truly terrifying mental fortitude, that was for sure.

Mushiki was unable to move for a few seconds, but finally, as though breaking loose from his bonds, he managed to breathe again and rise to his feet. His legs were still trembling.

At that moment, Kuroe approached him.

“Are you okay, Mushiki?” she asked.

“Y-yeah... Somehow. But...a game just to appeal to me...? ...Really?”

“There are various methods. The difficult part will be not overstepping the

rules. By the way..."

"Yes?" he asked with his head tilted.

Then, out of nowhere, Kuroe pinched the back of his hand.

"...Ow?!"

It had happened so suddenly that he ended up crying out in alarm.

Silvelle, startled, blinked a few times. *"Is something the matter, Mukkie?"*

"Ah... No, it's nothing..." He tried to brush the question aside, turning to Kuroe in confusion. "What was that about...?"

"There was a mosquito on you."

"...Shouldn't you swat it then, instead of pinching?"

"It's Saika's turn next," she said lightly, ignoring his remarks as she approached the back of the stage. "Lady Saika should return in a moment. Mushiki, please wait out there."

"Huh? Ah, right." He nodded.

With those words, Kuroe vanished backstage.

Of course, he knew better than anyone that Saika wasn't there waiting to reappear. No, the Saika who had been participating in this contest thus far was none other than himself.

Kuroe seemed to have a plan of some kind, but what on earth could it be?

"Huh?"

Before he knew it, he cried out in a wild voice.

Just a few minutes after Kuroe had left, a hand poked out from beyond the door at the back of the stage, delicately wriggling its fingers.

"Th-that hand—"

"Is that Madam Witch...?"

Hushed murmurs began to course through the audience.

Yes, it was clear as day from its majestic movements that the hand belonged

to Saika Kuozaki herself.

“Um... Saachie? Won’t you come onstage?” Silvelle asked.

“...”

To all appearances, Saika’s hand beckoned to him slowly, bewitchingly.

“Hmm, well... I suppose this should be okay... Saachie is on the offensive, so let’s start the countdown!” Silvelle declared.

With that, the hand motioned elegantly with a casual fluidity even more mesmerizing than before.

It was practically calling out to him.

“Ah...”

His eyes widened, and like a moth drawn to flames, he found himself staggering unsteadily toward the gesturing hand.

He knew full well that it wasn’t Saika who was waiting for him. Yet he could only see the hand as belonging to her.

Then—

“...What are you doing, Kuroe?” he whispered softly after disappearing backstage to an area where he could see her in her entirety.

Yes. The hand that everyone had taken for Saika’s actually belonged to Kuroe, who had vanished from sight a few minutes earlier.

...Well, it was only natural that everyone had fallen for it. After all, that hand was moving according to Saika’s own will, complete with her own peculiarities and mannerisms.

“Due to the nature of the contest, both Saika and Mushiki must be present onstage at the same time,” Kuroe explained. *“This is the only way.”*

“Ah... I guess that makes sense,” he murmured, lowering his voice so no one outside could overhear.

“By the way,” she added, her eyes narrowing. *“You seemed to enjoy Clara’s charms just now.”*

“Huh...?!”

“You’ve been acting like you would naturally choose Saika, but that looked like a close call to me. Wouldn’t you say?”

“N-no, I was just...”

“I’m not blaming you. No, rather, I should commend Clara for putting up such a good fight.” She paused for a moment. “The word *defeat* doesn’t belong in the same sentence as the name *Saika Kuozaki*. Even in a match as ridiculous as this. You understand that, I trust?”

“Y-yes, of course. Once the time limit is up, I’ll go back onstage and say Saika won—”

“That won’t be enough.”

“Huh?”

His eyes bulged from their sockets as Kuroe began to unbutton her uniform.

“...?! K-Kuroe?! What are you...?!”

He had been left stunned by how quickly this was all proceeding, but that didn’t stop her from removing her uniform...

She must have been wearing two layers of clothing, as underneath, she had on a bathing suit.

In the dimly lit space behind the stage, only two dependable pieces of clothing protected her naked body, which otherwise would have been completely exposed. The sight was so extraordinary that Mushiki felt himself swooning.



“Huh...? U-um...?!”

His sense of reason couldn't keep up. As he stared at her, he could feel his face burning up.

Then Kuroe glanced down at her outfit and said plainly, “Oh, this? I got it ready during Clara's five minutes.”

“N-no, I mean, why would you even...?” he stammered.

She stepped forward, pressing him up against the wall. “I told you. Just *saying* Saika won isn't enough. That isn't true victory. It's a pity I'm not in my real body, but I want you to *mean* it when you say Saika took the prize.”

“Hold on a—”

He lifted his hand, hoping to stop her from coming any closer—but alas, it soon met something soft.

Kuroe opened her lips, her cheeks faintly pink as she gave him a soft smile.

“Let's cry out in a loud voice at least—for I will make of you my bride.”

“Wh-what's going on...? That hand... Are you sure it was Madam Witch's?” Hizumi asked in confusion.

Ruri, sitting beside her, stroked her chin as she narrowed her eyes in thought. “Yes, there's no doubt about it. You could tell from her atmosphere. That was definitely Madam Witch,” she said confidently.

“I—I see...,” Hizumi responded with trepidation.

The students sitting around them nodded along, reassured by Ruri's strong conviction. *If Fuyajoh thinks so, it must have been her*, their expressions all but declared.

“...Um, so Kuga was lured backstage by Madam Witch...?”

“Yes. Knowing Madam Witch, she must have had some profound reason,” Ruri continued, when—

“Ah... Aaaaaaaahhhhh!!!” Mushiki cried out loud enough for everyone in the audience to clearly hear him.

“...?! Eh?!”

Ruri’s eyes shot open at this unexpected reaction.

It wasn’t long before the buzzer sounded to announce the end of Saika’s five minutes, and an exhausted-looking Mushiki staggered back onstage.

“M-Mukkie. Are you all right? What happened back there...?”

“...A hundred percent...”

“Huh?”

“Saika wins... A hundred percent...,” he murmured before collapsing with an audible thud.



“...Ah!”

Mushiki woke up with a start, suddenly lurching upright from the floor.

It looked like he had lost consciousness for a moment. Glancing around, he recognized that he was onstage in the multipurpose hall.

With that realization, it all came flooding back to him. He was supposed to be judging a competition between Saika and Clara.

“Are you okay, Mukkie?” Silvelle asked worriedly.

He placed a hand on his forehead. “I’m all right...,” he answered. “How long was I out for?”

“Only around a minute... But we were worried. What happened?”

“What happened...?”

He suddenly frowned, his thoughts going in circles... He couldn’t help but feel that *something incredible* had taken place, but he couldn’t quite remember what.

“Ugh, my head...”

“Oh, don’t overdo it, Mukkie. Anyway, you said the second round also goes to Saachie, right?” Silvelle asked, hurrying him along.

Come to think of it, he did recall having declared Saika the winner. He gave a

weak nod.

In short, Saika had won two of the three rounds—in other words, she had won the match.

But just as he was about to clench his fist in triumph—

“That’s our Saachie! She’s snatched victory yet again, winning another two points! But! The match isn’t over yet! The winner of the third round...will be awarded a full hundred points!”

“...Huh?! Why?!” he stammered, taken aback by this nonsensical allocation of points.

Silvelle, however, tilted her head as though she didn’t quite understand the question. *“Eh? Why what?”*

“No, it’s just, Saika already won two out of three...” But he stopped himself there.

Silvelle’s earlier explanation resounded in the back of his mind: *Once we reach the end, the entrant with the most points will be declared the winner.*

Yes. She hadn’t said that the winner would be whoever won the most rounds, nor did she actually specify how many points would be awarded each time.

“But that’s...not... Huh...?” he murmured, feeling threatened by this odd revelation.

“Phew...” Clara, however, let out a sigh of relief. “Ah, I totally thought I was done for. Lucky! I’m gonna wager everything on the third round!” she declared to the audience’s roaring cheers.

It looked like there were a few individuals who felt uncomfortable with the dubious rules, but their misgivings were drowned out by the excitement of those around them.

“...”

Mushiki glanced toward Kuroe, his gaze all but asking what he should do now.

She looked away, letting out a weak sigh. “I do agree it’s somewhat unfair, but Silvelle has decided the rules, so we don’t have any other choice but to play

along.”

Then, after a short pause, she added, “No matter how many rounds it takes, Saika will never allow herself to be defeated.”

The audience, overhearing this, only grew even more heated.

Clara gave a soft whistle. “Wow... You sound so cool saying that. Almost like Madam Witch herself.”

“I’m honored,” Kuroe responded coldly.

A poised comeback after being caught off guard. Mushiki would have expected no less of her.

...Well, if she was willing to go along with this, then he had no right to complain. In the first place, he was currently in his own body, not Saika’s.

“Huh? Isn’t Madam Witch coming back?” Clara asked, glancing over her shoulder to the back of the stage.

“She had to go save the world again,” Kuroe responded without the slightest hint of unease.

“Seriously? The world’s always in danger, huh?”

Mushiki couldn’t tell whether she had actually accepted this hollow excuse. No one else but Saika would have been able to get away with such a paper-thin pretext.

Perhaps hoping not to prolong this discussion, Kuroe turned to Silvelle. “So she won’t mind if we move on. Silvelle—Sis. What *is* the final round?”

“*Right!*” The AI beamed, positively overflowing with energy. “*The third round...is the power to protect those who matter most to you in times of crisis!*”

“Those who matter most to you...?” Kuroe repeated.

“Power...?” Clara echoed in turn.

Silvelle gave the two a firm nod as she spread her arms wide. “Yes. *Funnily enough, both Saachie and Clarin are taking part in tomorrow’s exhibition match. We’ll decide the outcome of this competition there. The winner will be the one whose school comes out on top!*”

“*Huh?*” echoed a mix of voices in perfect unison. “*Whaaat?!*”

It wasn’t just Mushiki and Clara—the entire hall cried out in mutual shock.

But that was to be expected.

Of course, they might end up inviting considerable criticism, using the exhibition match to settle a personal dispute.

But on the other hand, the entire affair had already descended into little more than a tenuous excuse to challenge Saika Kuozaki’s proficiency in magic.

“...Heh-heh.”

Nonetheless—

Clara didn’t seem the slightest bit flustered or concerned, her lips curling into a faint smile.

“Clara...?” he tried calling out uncertainly.

“No, I’m fine,” she answered with a wave of her hands. “There’s nothing wrong with me. It’s just... I mean, can this kind of thing actually happen?”

“...? What do you mean?” he asked with a confused grimace.

“I mean, you know,” she said with a deep nod. “I don’t think I’d really stand much chance against Madam Witch in a *real* fight. But tomorrow’s match is gonna be different. Her participation is conditional, and we’ve got our *new students* to lend a hand. And most of all...” She paused, raising her right hand overhead.

With that, her flying cell phone fell straight into her palm, as though sucked from the air. Then— “...?!” Mushiki gawked in disbelief.

The magical energy emanating from her body suddenly swelled, rising sharply in intensity.

“Ah, Madam Witch. Thanks to you, I’ve got more viewers now than ever before. This live stream of us duking it out over Mushipi—well, I would have been shocked if it *hadn’t* taken off. Still, if I’m being honest, this is even better than I was expecting.”

“Clara? Your magical energy, it’s...,” Mushiki began.

She broke into a grin. “Yep. There’s no need to hide it anymore. Clara here knows a little something called Influenster—a technique that keeps on increasing my strength and power as more people take an interest in me. And you know what? I’ve never been more popular!”

“What...?!”

“...In other words, you challenged Lady Saika just to live stream this whole affair and boost your own strength?” Kuroe asked, her gaze piercingly cold.

Clara shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I really am head over heels for Mushipi, you know? I’m not about to give him up—heck, I’m completely serious about this! But you see, the thing is, I’m still a student at the Tower, right? What was the saying? If I can power up *and* beat the Garden at the same time, it’ll be killing two birds with one stone? Or is it running after two hares?”

She paused there, holding her phone from above as she positioned herself in the camera frame.

Yes—she was taking a selfie.

“So thanks to Madam Witch, I’m ready to go! Claramates, tomorrow’s exhibition match is gonna be a must-see event!” she said with a wink.

Then, turning her gaze to Mushiki and flashing him a mysterious smile, she added, “It’s time to go witch hunting!”

Chapter 4

[MUST WATCH]

➤ The Exhibition Match Begins! ➤

That morning, the sound of birds chirping could be heard even clearer than usual.

One night had passed since the festival held before the main event. The grounds of the Garden were quiet and still, as though to belie the hectic hustle and bustle of the previous day.

The students who had been jostling about here and there across the campus just a half day before were now nowhere to be seen.

But that was to be expected.

After all—this was all soon to become a battlefield.

“...”

Mushiki took a deep breath to calm his mind before looking around once more.

He and the others were standing in front of the research building located at the far end of the Garden’s eastern precinct. The tall structure, seemingly composed of a bundle of looming spires, cast a distinctive shadow over the plaza.

Four figures were waiting there in total, all of them wearing uniforms similar to his own. This, however, was their first time meeting him face-to-face as Mushiki Kuga.

“Yo. So you’re the new transfer student? I’ve heard rumors about you. I’m Touya Shinozuka, a third-year. Thanks for coming today,” said a tall male

student as he held out his hand in greeting.

Touya Shinozuka. Unlike Mushiki, he had been chosen to represent the Garden the acceptable way.

“Ah yes. Mushiki Kuga. Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking the older youth’s hand.

Shinozuka’s grip was firm, his smile lively and refreshing.

Then the female student a short distance behind her male counterpart gave a quick bow. “Um... I’m Honoka Moegi. I’ll try not to get in your way...,” she said in a fearful voice, her body turned slightly away from him and her gaze wavering as she stared at the ground.

“Yes. Thank you. I’m not very experienced when it comes to this stuff, but I’ll do my best,” Mushiki replied.

Honoka, still embarrassed, lowered her head, her long bangs obscuring half her face.

Like Touya, she, too, had been chosen to represent the Garden. She seemed a little shy, but she must have been highly capable as a mage.

After greeting the two students, Mushiki found himself sighing in relief as he put his mind at ease.

He had been worried that, given how conspicuous he had been the day before, his fellow representatives might have misgivings about him—but neither Touya nor Honoka had shown any sign of ill will toward him.

Well, he couldn’t say what they might have been feeling deep inside, but it was nice to see that they were both willing to build a positive relationship with the team, even if only at a surface level.

After all, they were all now allies fighting for the same cause. For mages of this level representing their school, perhaps it was natural to try to avoid any unnecessary friction.

Then again, there were always exceptions.

“ ... ”

Feeling a piercing gaze at his back, Mushiki glanced over his shoulder.

Ruri, a real Knight of the Garden, was waiting behind him, watching on with grim displeasure.

“...It’s good to see you here, too, Ruri...?” he said timidly.

She, however, did nothing to hide her disapproval, fixing him in a glower. “There’s nothing *good* about it.”

...As he had expected, she wasn’t happy about her brother having been selected to represent the school. He hadn’t seen her as himself since the day before. He had fled through the back door behind the stage after the match with Clara to avoid confrontation.

“...Really, everything’s gone wrong with this exhibition match. You get picked to represent the Garden despite just transferring in, and for some reason, your record shows you’ve even defeated a mythic-class annihilation factor...!” Her voice, already hoarse, trailed off, as though she couldn’t stand it anymore. With each word, blood vessels swelled on the back of her hands, and the wrinkles between her eyebrows grew deeper.

“Please calm yourself, Knight Fuyajoh.”

Calling out to her from the side was the fifth student joining them—Kuroe. “The decision has been made, so there is nothing we can do about it,” she admonished in a calm, levelheaded manner. “I understand you don’t want to place your beloved brother in harm’s way, but—”

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaa?!” Ruri screamed, her face turning scarlet. “Wh-wh-what are you talking about?! M-m-my *beloved*?! Wh-wh-who’s that supposed to be?! Don’t go putting words in my mouth!” she rasped. Her panic was writ large, her eyes spinning like a pair of migratory fish.

“Oh, was I mistaken? I thought you were angry because you care deeply about Mushiki?”

“Wh-wh-*who* said anything like *that*?! That’s not it! I just meant as a mage at the Garden, I can’t let someone as inexperienced as *him* represent us...!”

“Hmm. Knight Fuyajoh, are you saying an inexperienced mage subdued a

mythic-class annihilation factor?”

“Th-that’s... It isn’t even clear he actually *did* that!”

“I’ve received confirmation from Lady Saika herself. Or are you accusing her of lying?”

“Ngh...!” Ruri ground her teeth in frustration.

But that couldn’t be helped. Like Mushiki, Ruri was a member of the Saika Kuozaki Fan Club. If asked whether she doubted her, she would be left with no choice but to back down.

Just to note, the Saika Kuozaki Fan Club was an unofficial, imaginary organization. No such entity actually existed.

But Ruri, still seemingly unconvinced, turned her gaze toward him. “For the sake of this argument, what about all that stuff with Clara?! Ever since she declared him her boyfriend, she somehow got Madam Witch caught up in all this—and even went to the trouble of getting some kind of insane power-up...!”

“U-um, I’m not really...,” he tried to interrupt, his brow quivering.

It was undeniably true that Clara had caused a major commotion—and that Mushiki himself was at the center of that—but he had also been dragged into it against his own will. Still, he realized just how poor of a response that was.

Her face having turned slightly pale, Ruri asked him suspiciously, “Mushiki. Is she really your type?”

“I—I wouldn’t say that exactly...”

“Then why did she call you her boyfriend?”

“I told you: She went and did that all by herself.”

“...Then do you like her?”

“Hmm?”

“What? So you won’t answer?”

“It’s not like that... I mean... She *does* have nice long hair; she’s calm, cool, dignified, and—”

“Wh-wh-what are you doing saying all that embarrassing stuff in front of everyone?!”

For some reason, Ruri’s face had turned scarlet, and she started slamming her fists against his body.

With no idea what was going on, in his confusion, he was left with no choice but to cross his arms and endure her onslaught.

At that moment—

A faint light gathered in the center of the square, taking the form of a young woman.

“Hi! So we’re all here, my little sisters and brothers? Are you all ready?” the Garden’s administrative AI Silvelle asked in a buoyant tone as she spun around and adopted a cute pose.

Only then did she seem to realize that Ruri and Mushiki looked like they were fighting in the middle of the plaza.

“Huh? Did something happen?”

“...It’s nothing!” Ruri folded her arms, uttering an audible *hmph!* and turning away.

Silvelle stared at her with curiosity for a few seconds but soon snapped back to the situation at hand. *“All right. Let me explain the rules of the match, then. The battle area occupies the Garden’s eastern, western, and central precincts. The Garden’s team will start at the easternmost end of the east precinct, and the Tower’s team will start at the westernmost end of the west precinct. The match will begin when the bell sounds at noon.”*

She paused for a moment before continuing. *“The outer walls of the facilities have been reinforced with defensive magic, so they shouldn’t be damaged by half-hearted strikes, but please refrain from attacking any more than necessary. You can use substantiation techniques up to the second level, and the first team to defeat all their opponents will be declared the winner. Players will be retired if their damage counter reaches zero. You’re all wearing them, I hope?”* she asked, gesturing to her own wrist.

Mushiki glanced at the watch-shaped device strapped to his arm. The device was emitting a soft-blue light.

“When those counters attached to your uniforms determine that you have sustained a certain amount of damage, the color will change from yellow to red. When that happens, you will be required to retire from the field and make your way to the noncombat area immediately. Any further use of magic will be prohibited. Also, please remember that attacking a retired contestant is also forbidden... Well, I guess that’s about it for now? Does anyone have any questions?”

“...Um, Silvelle? Can I have a minute?” Ruri asked with her hand raised.

“...” Silvelle, however, showed no indication of responding.

“Silvelle?”

“...”

“Si-il-vel-le?”

“...”

“...Sis,” Ruri said at last in resignation.

“Oh! What do you need, Ruuru?” the AI answered with a buoyant smile.

“...There’s an additional rule this time as well, right? What about Madam Witch? I mean, she hasn’t come to join us. Where is she?” Ruri asked, glancing around.

Silvelle tapped herself on the forehead with an exasperated gesture. *“Ah, I forgot! Due to the special rule this time, the Garden’s team will begin the battle with only four contestants. Saachie will only be allowed to enter the competition once two of you have been withdrawn. However, please note that if all four members retire from battle before she can enter the combat zone, your team will be deemed to have been wiped out, and the match will end there... As for where she is now—”*

“I can answer that,” Kuroe said, raising her hand slightly. “Lady Saika is presently on standby outside the combat area. She will be notified as soon as two of you are confirmed to have dropped out of the battle, but you should

expect a slight delay before she can actually enter the field herself. If two of your members are defeated, it would be wise for the remaining two to avoid battle and wait for her to join you.”

With those words, she glanced meaningfully at Mushiki. He responded with a slight nod.

Of course, she had already told him all this in advance.

Once that permission was granted, Kuroe would enter the combat area to seek him out and help him undergo a state conversion—and from there, *Saika* would enter the battle.

...But even by their best estimates, the process would take at least three minutes to complete.

“Ah... I see. That sounds like the safest approach.” Touya nodded, his expression slightly haggard. “We’re all skilled here... But then again, we’re only students. Probably only Fuyajoh will be strong enough to fight opponents at the level of our teachers. I hate to admit it, but it’s probably no exaggeration to say that this match will hinge on how quickly Madam Witch can join the fray... Ah! Of course, if Kuga here is as strong as everyone says, we might be able to rely on him, too.”

“...Please don’t expect too much of me,” Mushiki murmured fretfully.

Touya shrugged, answering *Okay*. Unlike Ruri, he hadn’t objected to Mushiki being part of the team, but he did seem to think it something of a risk to not know the full combat potential of his allies on the field.

“We’re lucky the battlefield is the Garden this time around. We’re on home turf. So I’d like to suggest we each act independently once the match begins. How does that sound?”

“...Um, but if we’re not careful, it could end up being five against one...,” Honoka noted, her solemn face writ with worry.

“...That *is* a possibility. But it will ensure that all four of us can’t be defeated at once. I think it’s best that we don’t fight as a group here.”

“I see...,” Mushiki murmured, stroking his chin, deep in thought.

It was just like Touya said. This battle would hinge on whether they could play their trump card, Saika. If they kept to standard tactics, they would risk getting wiped out before they had that chance.

Besides, it would be much easier for him to undergo a state conversion and reemerge as Saika if he had reason to leave the battlefield in the first place.

“I have no objections,” Mushiki said.

“Why are *you* so full of confidence?” Ruri asked with a narrowed eyes.

Even then, it didn’t look like she was opposed to this strategy, either. Staring at the ground, she nodded.

After checking how everyone else felt about this plan, Honoka made up her mind and nodded in agreement.

“All right, it’s decided,” Touya announced. “Once the starting signal sounds, we’ll each go our separate ways. Keep low, scout out potential enemies to target, and if possible, destroy them. Our first priority is Takeru Matsuba. After him, Clara Tokishima.”

“Hmm. May I ask why those two?” Kuroe asked.

“Because those are the only ones who we’ll be able to handle as students ourselves,” Touya answered, glancing her way. “Given what we all saw from Clara’s show yesterday, we ought to be careful of her... But I doubt she’s at the same level as the teachers.”

“...I see.”

“Am I wrong?”

“No. I think that’s a logical decision,” Kuroe said softly, averting her gaze.

Mushiki sensed something bordering apprehension in that look—but he was probably the only one to notice it.

Indeed, Touya didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned about Kuroe’s response, and he continued, “I don’t mind adding Tetsuga Suoh and Wakaba Saeki to the list of targets just for Fuyajoh—but the headmaster, Shionji, is off-limits. Until Madam Witch joins the fight, don’t attempt to challenge him.”

“Is he really that strong?” Mushiki asked with a touch of suspicion.

His impression of the older man had been of an eccentric grandfather harboring a strong sense of rivalry in his heart.

Yet—

“He’s the headmaster of a mage-training institute. We all ought to know what *that* entails.”

“...”

Touya’s retort possessed such persuasive power that it brooked no objection.

That said, he was certainly right. Someone of the older man’s standing couldn’t possibly be just any ordinary mage.

Mushiki slapped his cheeks with his hands to ready himself and get his thoughts in order, when—

“Have you finished discussing everything?” Silvelle asked, popping up out of nowhere.

“...Wha—?!” Mushiki and the others cried out.

Somehow, she had contorted her body to force her way into the circle that the five of them had made to discuss their strategy, a feat made possible because she existed as a three-dimensional projection without physical substance.

“Hey, don’t scare us like that.”

“Excuse me. But it’s almost time,” she said with a wave of her hand—the numbers 11:55 appearing a short distance away.

There were five minutes to go before the battle got underway. It seemed the team had been lost in discussion for longer than Mushiki had realized.

“...”

He and the others exchanged silent nods—then began to make their way to their starting positions so they could spread out across the battlefield.

Kuroe, too, gave everyone a short head bob. “In that case, I’ll leave the combat area. Good luck, everyone,” she said before exiting the square.

The remaining students waved good-bye, before turning their attention toward the west—the direction from which the Tower’s team would start the match.

“There’s three minutes to go, so I’ll be off as well! I’m working double duty as the referee, so I can’t go out of my way to help you all, but I do wish you the best of luck!”

“Ah. Thanks, Sis,” Touya replied.

“...We’ll do our best, Sis,” Honoka exclaimed.

“Yep. Just you watch, Sis,” Mushiki added.

Silvelle flashed them all a joyous grin—before turning her gaze toward Ruri, the only one who hadn’t said anything yet.

“...Right, right. Sis,” Ruri muttered under her breath.

“Hee-hee! Then good luck, everyone!” The AI beamed before disappearing into thin air.

Something about this exchange struck Mushiki as strangely funny, and he couldn’t help but break out into a smile.

“...What are you laughing at?” Ruri demanded.

“Sorry... It’s just, you don’t seem to like thinking of Silvelle as an elder sister.”

Yes, that was probably the source of her discomfort. She was normally so calm and rational, at least so long as Saika wasn’t concerned. He couldn’t imagine her refusing to use someone’s self-appointed nickname if it helped smooth the conversation along.

“She *isn’t* my sister.”

“Well, I guess you’re right about that.”

“Addressing someone who isn’t my sister as *Sis*...feels like I’m talking to *your* wife or something.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Just concentrate on the match... Honestly, I’m not convinced yet, but seeing as you’ve been chosen to represent the Garden, you’d better

put on a good show.”

“Yep. I know,” he answered with a nod, clenching his fists.

Then, from the direction of the central precinct, the sound of the noontime bell rang out.

The exhibition match between the Garden and the Tower had officially started.

“All right, let’s do this. Everyone, as planned, spread out, and—”

But before Touya could finish his sentence—

“Huh?”

At that moment, a point of light suddenly lit up like a star in the sky.

Something was flying in a straight line right for them.

“Dodge it!” Ruri screamed, and then—

Before their very eyes, a fierce explosion burst out.

“...?! ”

A blinding flash. A violent sound. Terrible tremors. The shock wave hit Mushiki’s whole body.

His eyes, his ears, his skin—every one of his five senses was struck with more information than it could process, his consciousness flickering in and out for a few seconds.

“Mushiki!”

“...!”

Despite that, when he heard his name called out loud, he somehow managed to keep from blacking out.

Only then did he realize it—a veil of blue light was spread out before him.

“Huh...?”

For a second, he took it for an enemy attack—but he was wrong.

Ruri had activated a long-handled weapon—and the veil that had enveloped

him and the others had extended from its handle.

There could be no mistaking it. This was Ruri's second substantiation, her Luminous Blade. She must have noticed the attack first and jumped into action to protect them.

Mushiki knew she could mold her magic-infused blade into all kinds of shapes and forms, but he had never seen her wield it like this.

On the other side of the shield, there was now a huge crater in the ground, as if a meteor had fallen. The surrounding buildings and facilities, reinforced with defensive magic, looked to be fine, but the ground itself had been left devastated.

Tremendous power. If Ruri hadn't protected them, he might have been retired from battle then and there.

"Oh, so you blocked it? Well done, Ruri Fuyajoh. You live up to your name as a Knight of the Garden."

At that moment—

"...?!"

Mushiki and the others glanced upward as, without warning, a voice rang out.

Floating in the air above them was an older man with long hair and a bellarmine-shaped beard, dressed in an ill-fitting Tower uniform.

At his feet was a two-stage world crest shaped like a magic square, and in his right hand, he grasped a staff imbued with dense magical energy.

He was none other than the Tower's headmaster, the recently enrolled first-year student Gyousei Shionji.

"Headmaster Shionji...?! A-are you crazy? The Tower's starting position is supposed to be in the western precinct...! And that attack just now...," Touya yelled in shock, his voice trembling.

Shionji, his eyes narrowed, raised his chin. "*Crazy...?* If you intend to call yourself a mage, you should refrain from using such language. We are the guardians of the world, the seekers of mystery. It isn't at all unusual for our opponents to make unexpected moves," he said profoundly, as though

imparting important knowledge.

Mushiki and Ruri both grimaced in trepidation.

“Ugh... H-he’s too powerful...!”

“I can’t believe *he* was the one who kept complaining about Madam Witch yesterday...!”

“...That’s...a separate matter. She’s usually the one at fault there,” Shionji retorted, but he slurred, and his words were difficult to make out.

He paused for a second to clear his throat and regain his composure, then stared down with a scowl at the trapped students. “More importantly... Are you sure about this? I *am* trying to go easy on you all here.”

“Huh...?”

“I’m asking if it’s really okay for just one of you to be activating your second substantiation against an opponent ready and willing to wage war here.”

“...!”

Upon hearing that, the students from the Garden froze in apprehension.

“Unfurling Fan!”

“Graphier...!”

Touya and Honoka both activated their world crests, readying their second substantiations—a huge iron fan and a gigantic paintbrush, respectively.

Then, as though waiting for that signal, the ground began to reverberate with a distant rumbling.

“...Wh-what’s going on?!”

The next moment, to Mushiki’s dismay, the earth shook violently, and the paving stones at his feet suddenly blasted upward.

From the ground below, Tetsuga Suoh, wielding a huge drill-shaped second substantiation in his hands, appeared before them. He must have dug his way underground to launch a surprise attack.

“Ha-ha! If you spend all your time worrying about what’s up above, someone

else will come along and knock you off your feet! Literally!”

“Ugh...!”

Mushiki leaped away from what little ground remained, jumping to safety.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Wakaba Saeki, in her uniform bulging at the seams, must have accompanied Tetsuga underground, as she also leaped up armed with a green Gatling gun.

“Hey, don’t forget about us! It’s time for my super-duper rad gigantic unbelievable fury dream (god level)!”

As she shouted these incomprehensible words, she let loose with a volley of bullets aimed straight at Mushiki; he heard the projectiles’ terrible whir in full force.

“Tch!”

Touya twisted through the air, unfolding his huge iron fan—and a substantial gust of wind deflected the oncoming bullets. The projectiles careened away from Mushiki and the others, detonating on the ground and the walls of nearby buildings.

Wakaba, however, didn’t seem surprised by their reactions, her lips curling in a faint smile. “Hmm, good work there. But...like...you still haven’t seen my second substantiation!” she exclaimed, adding in words as she remembered them, then lifting her hand into the air.

“Spread!”

At that moment, the bullet that had collided with the walls and group suddenly stirred, countless tendrils erupting from them.

“What...?!”

“Kyargh!”

Touya and Honoka were quickly ensnared, the roots disrupting their battle stances.

Ruri didn’t wait a second longer before, with a flicker of her Luminous Blade, she sliced through the crawling vines.

“Thanks!”

“No problem. Just be careful! This isn’t over!” she cried back.

Indeed, more tendrils than the eye could count were still sprouting from the bullets sprawled all around—and were flailing about like tentacles as they lashed at Ruri and the others.

“Ngh...”

“Ha!”

Touya wielded his iron fan to let loose a huge gust of wind, while Honoka used her paintbrush to create a path in midair as the group made its escape.

But they weren’t just fighting against Wakaba’s vines. Seizing his opportunity while the Garden’s fighters were distracted, Tetsuga readied his drill and rushed toward Ruri.

“Special Attack Drill! Auuuggghhh!”

“...! Ugh—”

Though she could see the attack coming, Ruri was still caught off guard, unable to respond. At this rate, she would soon take considerable damage and be forced to retire.

The condition for Saika to enter the battle was for two of the Garden’s fighters to drop out of the match. In other words, if the opposing team struck down just one of them, she still wouldn’t be able to intervene. Which explained why they were focusing on taking out their most capable fighter first.

“Ruri—!”

The rules being what they were, the best move available to him might have been to help take the brunt of the attack so the two of them could retire together—thereby fulfilling the necessary preconditions for Saika to make her appearance.

But right now, he had other things on his mind.

After all, Ruri—his younger sister—was in danger. As her brother, he needed no other reason to take action.

“Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!”

Letting out a loud cry, he leaped forward to shield Ruri from the oncoming drill.

“...! Mushiki—”

He heard her voice echoing. It was such a nostalgic sound—but in their current situation, he didn’t have the luxury of time to respond to it. All he could do was hone his senses and ready himself to meet the oncoming drill.

A moment later—

“.....”

A violent clamor erupted behind him.

Tetsuga had been sent careening off course, and he slammed into the wall of a nearby building.

That was no coincidence—nor had he purposefully adjusted his trajectory at the last second.

No, the reason for his collision was simple.

He had been knocked off course by the semitransparent blade that had just appeared in Mushiki’s hands.

“Ah...” Ruri’s stunned voice echoed amid the silence. “Your second...substantiation...?”

Her gaze was locked onto the sword clutched in his hands—and on the two-stage crown-like world crest that had appeared above his head.

“Hollow Edge,” Mushiki muttered, recalling the previous night with a resigned sigh.



“Let’s try to reproduce that again.”

“...Reproduce it?”

The night before the exhibition match, shortly after the second round against Clara, Kuroe had led Mushiki to the forecourt in front of Saika’s mansion.

The reason was simple—to practice activating his substantiations.

Even with the match set to take place the very next day, he still couldn't freely initiate his second substantiation at will.

"It's true that unlocking one's second substantiation is a hurdle for any mage. But it's quite unbelievable that a mage who hasn't managed to do so would be selected to represent the Garden in a demonstration battle. Any beginner on the field would immediately become the target of the other side—and be swiftly eliminated... Then again, there *is* an unusual case in tomorrow's match, so it might not necessarily be a bad idea to drop out early. However, there is a great difference between deciding the right timing to retire from the match by yourself and being utterly defeated without recourse."

"...Right," Mushiki murmured, obediently nodding.

"That being said, you have successfully activated your second substantiation on two occasions thus far—the first when you faced *her* and the second during your training with me. We should try to look for what both situations had in common."

"What they had in common...?" he repeated, sinking deep into thought. "The first time... I kind of lost myself, so I don't really remember a whole lot. I was so focused on helping her—and Saika, too, that I—"

"Hmm. And the second time?"

"I thought if I could pull it off, Saika would answer any question I had. It was all I could think about."

"..."

He was being completely honest, but Kuroe fell silent for some reason. Finally, as though having realized something, her eyebrows twitched.

"It's Lady Saika, wouldn't you say?"

"Huh?"

"Both situations were completely different, but on both occasions, you were thinking very strongly about Lady Saika."

"...! I see. So you're saying my magic exists for her, right?"

“I didn’t say that,” she responded with an unamused look. “Mental fortitude is the key to wielding magic. It isn’t uncommon for one’s power output to differ depending on how mentally prepared they are—or how aware they are of their surroundings. For now, please try to invoke your magic while thinking of Lady Saika.”

“All right.”

He took a deep breath, squeezed his eyes shut, and pictured Saika.

“Saika... I’ll definitely—”

Then, filled with raw determination, he clenched his fists and whispered a prayer in his heart.

“That’s it. Strengthen your mental image of her,” Kuroe urged.

“Right... Ah... Saika... What are you...? N-no, you can’t... That’s... We haven’t even started dating yet—”

“Just *what* are you imagining?” Kuroe interrupted, hitting him over the head and putting an end to his carefully crafted reverie.



“Thank goodness it worked.”

Mushiki let out a soft sigh of relief as he stared at the transparent blade in his hands.

During yesterday’s lesson, with Kuroe’s help, he had focused on repeatedly visualizing Saika, and thanks to those efforts, he had successfully reactivated his second substantiation. That being said, whether he could pull off the same feat during the heat of battle was a different story.

“A transparent...sword...,” Ruri whispered, her voice almost imperceptibly quiet.

Mushiki looked her over to make sure she was safe, then gave her a short nod.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“...”

Her cheeks reddened slightly as she shrugged. Nonetheless, she quickly shook her head to disguise that reaction.

“Mushiki,” she said. “When did you manage to learn your second substantiation...?”

“I realized I can activate it when I think really strongly about someone I love.”

“Someone you... Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying all of a sudden...?!” Her voice trailed off, her face, already slightly pink, turning bright red.

That certainly wasn’t an appropriate reaction to have in the midst of battle, but Mushiki just couldn’t understand why she seemed so flustered.

“...Oh? You did it... But did *what* exactly, I’m wondering? It takes something special to throw off my Special Attack Drill,” came Tetsuga’s voice as he turned around, the broken pieces of the wall falling behind him.

Part of the drill-type second substantiation in his hands had disappeared, leaving behind a sparkling glow of raw magical power.

“...”

Mushiki found himself catching his breath at that sight—but he did his best not to dwell on it.

Indeed, he had managed to manifest his second substantiation by thinking strongly of Saika, but he had still to fully grasp the entire extent of his magic.

“...Well, if that’s all you’ve got...”

Tetsuga stared at him, gauging his reaction, before deactivating his broken second substantiation and then manifesting it once more in perfect condition.

“...”

Ruri, who had been peering up at Mushiki until that moment, noticed the fresh threat aimed at her and cleared her throat to regain her composure while she glared at the Tower instructor.

“It looks like these guys anticipated that we would try to split up at the earliest opportunity,” she noted.

“...It looks that way,” Touya added.

“Well... No arguments there,” Honoka chimed in, her expression stern.

Shionji, Tetsuga, and Wakaba, on the other hand, calmly braced themselves as they faced Mushiki’s second substantiation.

Ruri’s guess was probably on the mark. Just like Mushiki and his teammates, their opponents had understood the conditions necessary for Saika to enter the field—and based their strategy on ensuring that they couldn’t be fulfilled.

That being the case, what would be the next step?

They could try to attack the Garden’s team at the very beginning of the match, before they had a chance to disperse, or they could try to restrict their movements by refusing to defeat any of them until they could finish them off as one.

In fact, that was precisely what they were attempting right now.

Ruri’s quick thinking had somehow saved them from being annihilated at the very outset of the match—but to put it mildly, their present situation could hardly have been worse.

After all, they were practically unable to make any moves and were held in check by a team of teachers whom they had little hope of defeating.

“...And the other two Tower members aren’t here. Clara and Matsuba must be lurking around somewhere nearby... Especially Clara—she won’t stop blabbering about how she’s going to beat Madam Witch and become your girlfriend. I can’t believe she’ll hold back without doing anything... The amount of magic she showed off yesterday was extraordinary. We had better be careful,” Ruri cautioned with heightened vigilance.

That was certainly true. Clara was a flamboyant one, so it was guaranteed that she would try something. Mushiki focused on his surroundings.

But Tetsuga, overhearing their discussion, scratched his head. “Ah... They’ll probably take a bit longer getting here. Unlike us, they’ll have to take the long way, running across the campus from west to east on foot.”

“...” Ruri said nothing, but the trickle of sweat running down her cheek betrayed her anxiety.

Perhaps she suspected that their opponent was bluffing, or she was embarrassed that he had read them so perfectly.

The latter option seemed more likely from Mushiki's point of view, but they wouldn't get anywhere with that mindset, so he decided to challenge the former possibility himself.

"Mushiki," Ruri said in a low voice, casting her gaze over Shionji and the others. "We'll hold their headmaster and the others back. Use that opportunity to get out of here and hide."

"What are you saying? I can't—"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting this out of concern for your safety. Not this time."

"This time?"

"...This isn't the place to be focusing on anything weird," she harrumphed, her cheeks turning red. "To be perfectly honest, going head-to-head against three teachers puts us all in the worst possible position. But even if we all get wiped out, at least we'll have cleared the necessary conditions for Madam Witch to enter the battle."

"That's...," he began to protest, but Touya and Honoka each nodded in agreement.

...Any further objection, he realized, would be disrespectful to them. With that new resolve, he bowed in assent.

"...I understand. I'll leave this to you, Ruri, Shinozuka, Moegi."

"You got it," Ruri answered, her expression grave.

Touya and Honoka likewise indicated their understanding.

"Then...let's go!" Ruri commanded.

"Yeah...!"

With that, the three students hit the ground running—and the opposing teachers from the Tower each manifested their second substantiations to intercept them.



“...”

Anviet Svarner was in a particularly grouchy mood.

There were two main reasons for this.

The first was that it was the day of the interschool demonstration battle between the Garden and the Tower, and he had been forced to go on a trip to the countryside to take care of an unruly monster.

The second was that he had so dutifully accepted this unreasonable and sudden request.

“Tch...”

Anviet, his eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses, clicked his tongue irritably as he slammed his foot down on his car’s accelerator pedal.

He was driving along an unpaved mountain road, his vehicle shaking violently as the tires spun over the gravel-strewn path.

He would be lying if he said this wasn’t an uncomfortable journey, but he understood that it couldn’t be helped.

After all, the facility he was now making his way toward could never have been built in the middle of a quiet residential area.

Hoping to drown out his pent-up frustration as he made his way along the rough road, he turned up the volume on his car’s radio and bobbed his head from left to right.

After around three hours of staring at the unchanging scenery, he finally reached his destination.

At first glance, there didn’t look to be anything at all out of the ordinary. Most likely, the only people who would bother to stop at a place like this would be those who were running low on gas or who needed to use the restroom on their way to somewhere else.

He brought the vehicle to a halt in the parking lot, pulled out the keys, and stepped outside. Of course, he didn’t forget to lock the doors. It was unlikely that anyone would attempt to steal his car in such a remote place, but it was

always better to be safe than sorry.

Then, retrieving his cell phone from his pocket and opening the map, he cautiously walked into the field of overgrown weeds.

“...Ah... Around here, maybe?”

After confirming that his guess had been right on the money, he walked directly into a nearby boulder.

If it had been any normal boulder, he would naturally have crashed into the rock face—but his foot passed through it without meeting any resistance whatsoever.

Just like the techniques used at the Garden, perception magic had been employed to make it impossible for those on the outside to discern the area that he had just entered.

Within the rock was a high-tech elevator with an authentication device; this modern piece of machinery was completely at odds with its surroundings.

After verification and performing an iris scan, the elevator doors slid open, and he made his way down to the basement.

It was a tedious procedure, but very much necessary when one considered just how important this place was—and what was contained within.

Indeed, it was one of several sealed facilities scattered across the world—the same kind that existed beneath the Garden’s central library.

After a few minutes, the elevator reached the appropriate floor. No sooner had the doors slid open than he proceeded down the long corridor stretching out ahead.

It wasn’t long before he reached a large metal door with a pair of guards standing before it. One had a bushy beard, and the other wore a pair of glasses. The fact that they were stationed here meant they were no doubt mages themselves.

“Yo. I need to go inside.”

Given that he had already completed the security tests on the upper floor, the guards must have known the identity of their visitor, as the pair stood erect and

gave him a polite salute.

“You’re Anviet Svarner, an instructor at the Garden, right? We’ve heard so much about you.”

“It’s an honor to meet the famous Lord of Thunder.”

“Ah... Yeah. You don’t need to call me that. It’s embarrassin’,” he said with a frown.

“S-sorry.” The guard bowed.

“So what brings you here today?” the other asked.

“I’ve had an annoyin’ little errand foisted on me. I need to check the sealed object inside... No idea why this is so important on the day of the match, though.”

“Yes, isn’t the exhibition match between the Tower and the Garden taking place today?”

“You betcha. Nothing beats watchin’ those punks duke it out over a good drink,” Anviet said, raising an imaginary glass.

The guards laughed in agreement. “Indeed. What I’d do to get off work early and go enjoy a beer.”

“Huh? I didn’t say anythin’ about alcohol. I’m talkin’ about cola here.”

“Oh. You don’t drink?”

“That ain’t it. Even if I don’t have classes, a match like that is still part of my official duties. A teacher can’t drink on the job. Besides, it’d make it hard to watch the kids’ moves.”

“...I—I see...”

This guy’s different from how he looks, the look on the guard’s face all but said.

“Um... So which sealed specimen do you want to see?” the second one asked.

“O-08.”

“...”

No sooner had Anviet stated the number than the guards' expressions turned grim.

"I'm sorry, but can you tell us the purpose of this inspection?"

"Huh? Like I said, I've gotta check on it... Didn't Erulka put in a request just yesterday? She wanted a report on item O-08."

"Yes. And we stated there were no problems."

"That's why I'm here."

"Huh?"

"Of the twenty-four Ouroboros pieces, this facility was the only one that reported nothin' out of the ordinary. So just to be sure, I'm here to look it over. To check how it reacts to magic and confirm there ain't any abnormalities... Now let me see the head of that snake bastard that's gone and spoiled my fun."

"..."

The guards glanced at one another. "Please wait a moment...", one of them said at last, before pressing a few buttons on their operating consoles.

With a heavy thud, the huge door began to swing open.

"Please, this way," the guards said.

"Yeah."

Anviet stepped inside.

At that moment—

"—."

The bespectacled guard reached into his pocket, pulled out an automatic pistol, and without the slightest hesitation, he aimed it straight at Anviet and pulled the trigger.

That bang echoed through the underground facility.

Yet—

"What the...?"

The next sound wasn't an agonized cry from Anviet or the sound of his body

falling to the floor, but the bewildered wail of the guard who had fired the bullet.

But that was to be expected.

Just before the bullet could hit the back of Anviet's head, it had been frozen in place by a powerful electric charge.

"...You seriously thought you could kill me with a toy like that? Did you take me for a fool or somethin'? Eh?" Anviet glared, the guard's eyes goggling in disbelief.

"Ngh...!"

The guard's face contorted as he tried to fire yet again. This time, his bearded companion pulled out his own gun.

"Hah!"

But with that thunderous roar, a bolt of lightning struck the two with full force.

"Gah...?!"

"Ngh...?!"

After a short moment of electrifying agony, the two guards fell to the ground in a charred heap.

Anviet frowned in suspicion.

"...What the hell's goin' on here? I thought Erulka was overthinkin' it all, but there's definitely somethin' fishy about all this."

In any event, he had to see to the task at hand. As he stepped through the door, his gaze fell on the crystal inside.

"...Hah?" He groaned, furrowing his brow.

The head of the Ouroboros should have been sealed within this facility—alongside the heart stored beneath the Garden, it was one of the most important pieces.

But before him was only the shattered remains of the crystal that had contained it.

“So the Ouroboros’s head...ain’t here?”

Anviet’s expression turned grim as he brought his hand to his mouth, deep in thought.

“...When did this all happen? Were they tryin’ to cover it up by lyin’ in their report to Erulka...? No, there’s no way anyone could keep this a secret forever. So what was the point of keepin’ the guards in the first place...?”

His thoughts having taken him this far, he suddenly stopped there.

The reason was simple. No sooner had he heard a noise coming from behind him than two dark figures attacked.

“Gah!”

“Arrrggghhh!”

It didn’t take long for him to realize his assailants were the two guards that he had just defeated.

He activated his world crest on his back and let loose with another barrage of lightning, felling the two as they let out agonized cries all over again.

“Hah. You’re tougher than you look, eh? I could have stopped your hearts with that one. But this is good timin’. So—what the hell happened to the seal here?”

But once more, Anviet was forced to swallow his words.

The two guards, though defeated a second time, rose to their feet.

“...Eh?”

His eyes narrowed in suspicion. He might have lowered his attack power that second time, but no one ought to be able to recover from a blow of that potency in just a few seconds. Were they using some kind of magic technique?

“No, it can’t be...”

With stable footing, he activated the next stage of his world crest—and a pair of three-pronged weapons appeared at his left and right.

“Second Substantiation: Vajdola!”

He thrust his hand forward, the substantiation rotating in the air and unleashing an electric surge at a magnitude stronger than before.

The two, enduring Anviet's direct hits—one to the guard's right arm, the other to his left shoulder—were thrown backward, slamming hard against the wall.

But—

“Argh... Aaauuuggghhh!”

With a hollow moan, they rose to their feet for a third time.

And that wasn't all. Their arms and shoulders, dismembered from that last attack, regenerated before his very eyes.

“Tch...”

Clenching his jaw, a sense of certainty flooded Anviet's mind.

The next moment, he slammed his foot down hard on the ground—sending an electric current coursing through the room and bringing the two guards down once again.

This time, however, they didn't attempt to get back up. Their only movement was a slight twitching of their fingers.

By hitting his targets with a weak, constant electric current, he had essentially inhibited the movements of their muscles. This would probably immobilize them for a while. Of course, he would need to call someone to properly restrain them later.

But for now, he had a more pressing matter to see to. He hurried back to the elevator and hit the button for the top floor.

As the elevator ascended back to the surface, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Erulka.

After several rings, her chirpy voice came through. *“Oh, Anviet? How is everything?”*

“How do you think it is?! The Ouroboros head ain't here! And to top it all off...” His voice hoarse, he delivered the most devastating news of all. “The

guards won't die! Someone's gone and used the Ouroboros's powers! This facility is supposed to be under the Tower's jurisdiction, right...?!"

"...What?"

"Keep your wits about you! There's a good chance the Tower's got Immortals on their side!"



Within the Garden, the majority of which had been cleared to make way for the exhibition match, one area in particular was bustling with activity—the training hall in the western precinct.

While the hall was usually set aside for students to practice their skills, it was imbued now with a somewhat different atmosphere. Above the large field, huge images were being projected in all directions, showing each of the competitors in the match. Students from both the Garden and the Tower were seated amid the spectator stands, cheering for their respective schools.

The interschool demonstration battle was intended to improve the fighting skills of students, but people being what they were, it was only natural for them to go wild with excitement, dividing themselves into teams of friend and foe.

In addition, the head teachers from both schools were participating in the match, while Saika and Clara were competing over a prospective boyfriend. All in all, there were three separate contests taking place simultaneously.

To top it all off—

"Whoa! First Gyoukie has reached the eastern precinct, now Wakabie! Is the Tower's strategy to defeat the Garden's fighters before Saachie can join the fray?!"

Silvelle was fluttering in midair, providing live commentary in her light, airy voice as though to fan the flames of the students' passions.

Incidentally, she occasionally split into two separate projections to hold a conversation with herself.

"What do you make of both teams' current progress, Silvelle?"

"I'd say the Tower is still wary of Saachie. Gyoukie and the others must want

to deal a decisive blow as quickly as possible.”

And so this one-person theater (though there was, visually speaking, more than one of them) continued to play out.

Despite the spectators being mages who swore to protect the world from amid the shadows, they were still young men and women, their youthful blood flowing thick in their veins. A show of this magnitude couldn't fail to ignite their spirit.

“Ruri... Kuga...”

Amid all this, Hizumi Nagekawa watched the battle, fraught with anxiety.

The reason for her unease was simple. Ruri and Kuga, both of whom were fighting right this very moment out there on the battlefield, were her classmates and friends.

Ruri might have been a knight, but Mushiki had only just enrolled at the Garden within the past month. He should never have been selected to take part in an event like this.

Yet Silvelle claimed that he had defeated a mythic-level annihilation factor. Hizumi had to admit that she found it difficult to believe, judging from how poorly he was currently fighting. She only hoped they wouldn't get hurt...

“Oh? What's wrong, Nagekawa? You look disheartened.”

As she watched the match, whispering a prayer in her heart, an unexpected voice called out to her.

Glancing up, she spotted a woman in her mid-twenties standing before her. She had loose, wavy hair and was wearing a blouse boldly open around the neck, along with a short, tight skirt. It was her class's homeroom teacher, Tomoe Kuriyada.

“Ah, Ms. Kuriyada...”

“Don't take it all so seriously. This is meant to be a festival, after all... Ah, do you mind if I sit here?”

“G-go ahead...,” Hizumi replied nervously.

Tomoe sat down beside her, then took a long swill of the beer clutched in her right hand. “*Glug... Glug... Ah!* Yep, there’s nothing like the thrill of an exhibition match!”

“...Um, I thought these exchange events between mage-training institutes weren’t meant to entertain but rather were created to hone students’ techniques so they can better fight annihilation factors...?”

“Oh, come on, don’t be so nitpicky. Stress is the number one enemy when it comes to maintaining your good looks, you know?” Tomoe said with a laugh.

It was clear from her flushed cheeks and unusual cheer that this wasn’t her first beer of the day.

“I’ll have to report this to Madam Witch later,” Hizumi murmured.

“I’m sorry, really, I didn’t mean it like that. I’ll give you some *takoyaki* to eat, so please, let me off the hook?” Tomoe sat suddenly upright, offering her a box of ball-shaped snacks.

The homeroom teacher’s hands were quivering—though whether from trepidation at Hizumi’s suggestion just then or from the alcohol, she couldn’t say.

Yes. Tomoe was usually brimming with self-confidence—but when faced with Saika, she trembled like a frightened Chihuahua.

Hizumi had no idea what might have happened between the two of them in the past, but in any event, Tomoe was also a mage of the Garden—which meant, in short, that she was Saika’s pupil. Maybe she had experienced something traumatic during her own school days?

She lifted one of the *takoyaki* into her mouth (it would be a waste not to eat them, after all) and then turned her attention back to the live broadcast.

“Will Ruri and Kuga really be okay? To think they’re fighting teachers from the Tower...”

“You don’t need to worry. I mean, Madam Witch will step in before too long,” Tomoe said in a relaxed voice, perhaps having let down her guard now that Hizumi had accepted her offer of food. She was as fast as ever when it came to

switching between fear and composure.

“But I thought Madam Witch couldn’t enter the match until two of the others had dropped out? But if all four of them are defeated at once, it will all be over before she can even intervene...”

“Huh?! Really?!” Tomoe gawked, her eyes widening in alarm.

...Apparently, she hadn’t realized that until now. Had she really mistaken this match for a festival or some form of entertainment?

“And isn’t this essentially a continuation of her contest against Tokishima yesterday? The right to be Kuga’s girlfriend is at stake, too...”

“Ah...I did hear something about that. But Madam Witch can’t be serious, can she? She probably just couldn’t turn down such an interesting challenge.”

“That might be true... But isn’t she also very particular about winning?”

“Sure, she’s a bit of a stickler there. Even if it’s just a game, she always plays to win,” Tomoe responded without hesitation.

Hizumi could sense the truth behind her words.

“Even if Madam Witch isn’t interested in Kuga... If she lost this match after entering it herself—and the contest against Tokishima, too...I’m sure she would be in a very, very bad mood...,” Hizumi observed, when—

“What are you doing out there, Fuyajoh?! Pick yourself up! Now! Give ’em hell! Slaughter them!” Tomoe broke out into cries of frantic support.

Hizumi let out a nervous chuckle. Naturally, it would be against the rules to actually kill the enemy team.

At that moment—

“...Huh?”

Her eyes widened in alarm.

All of a sudden, the projection screen, displaying the match without issue all this time, went haywire, ultimately switching to a bright-red error message.

The students from both the Garden and the Tower alike must have noticed that something was amiss, as hushed whispers spread throughout the crowd.

But the most discomfoting of all, at least as far as Hizumi was concerned, was the sight of Silvelle floating before the screen.

Even though the live broadcast had been disrupted, the AI hadn't attempted to explain the situation or assure the audience to keep them from flying into a panic. She was simply floating there in silence, her face downcast.

"Sis...?" Hizumi called out in concern (Silvelle wasn't her real sister, of course, but she understood that the AI wouldn't respond to anything else).

Then, as though in timed response: "...*Hee...*"

"What the—?!"

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

A high-pitched cackle of laughter echoed from the loudspeakers throughout the training area.

"Wh-what...?!" Hizumi quickly covered her ears from the sudden outburst, her confusion plain to see.

That was undoubtedly Silvelle's voice—but it was so different from her usual character that for a moment Hizumi failed to recognize it.

Then, as though to bolster her shock and bewilderment, the AI's face appeared in the center of the bright-red projection screen—her expression contorted into a mad grin.

"Hmm... So I've been found out? That was faster than I expected. Good work, Erulkie, Anvi. Good work, indeed." Silvelle spoke as though talking to herself, continuing, *"I could have jammed the signal... But we're almost at our destination now, so it's about time anyway. It would be a waste if we didn't go out with a bang, don't you think, everyone?"*

"What...? What on earth are you talking about...?" Hizumi asked in alarm, unable to comprehend what the AI was saying.

No, it wasn't just her. Everyone around, the other students as well, also looked to be at a complete loss.

But Silvelle paid them no heed, playfully spreading her arms out wide. *"Good day, my dear brothers and sisters. I have a regrettable announcement to make.*

I've been doing my best as your dear elder sister for so long... But the truth is: There's something far more important ahead of me now."

She paused there to bring her hands together with a deliberate clap, then extended her arms yet again. *"Let me introduce you, everyone—to my new brothers and sisters."*

The next moment—

"—!"



The students from the Tower—sitting throughout the training hall—every single one of them rose to their feet, letting out a terrible roar.

Then, activating their various magical abilities, they started lashing out at the Garden's students.

“What...?!”

“Kyargh!”

A whirlwind of dismay and alarm, a storm of screams and cries filled the training hall.

Then, in a droll, obsequious tone, Silvelle announced:

“And so, farewell—as of today, the Garden is finished.”

Chapter 5

[NSFW]

◀ Let Me Tell You Clara's Little Secret ▶

“...”

Just as he hit the ground running with Ruri's signal, a siren started blaring throughout the Garden with zero warning.

Mushiki and the others tensed up, stopping in their tracks.

“What...? An annihilation factor?!”

“No, this isn't the usual alarm. What's going on...?” Ruri glanced around in concern.

Then, as though in response to that very question, Silvelle's image popped up at various locations all across the campus.

“Yes, my dear brothers and sisters. The time has come...for a hunt. Please enjoy yourselves to the fullest,” her announcement blasted from the loudspeakers installed all around.

Mushiki and his other teammates exchanged looks of bewilderment, unable to make heads or tails of this declaration.

“Silvelle...? Sis...?” Touya began.

“What are you...?” Honoka continued in suspicion.

But that was to be expected. It was certainly true that, despite being an AI, Silvelle tended to behave somewhat eccentrically and displayed a number of strange obsessions. But at the same time, her conduct was essentially consistent with her primary function of looking out for the best interests of the

Garden.

This announcement, however, made absolutely no sense.

What on earth was she trying to communicate? And to whom?

“...”

At that moment, Mushiki caught his breath.

There was one group of people, he realized, who responded with something other than surprise to that declaration.

“Oh-ho!”

Gyousei Shionji, along with Wakaba Saeki and Tetsuga Suoh.

The three teachers from the Tower all narrowed their eyes as they faced off against the team from the Garden—as though having fully anticipated all this.

“That came sooner than I was expecting. Did they catch on already...? Or maybe they found it?”

“Heh-heh. Maybe both?”

“What does it matter? Either way, we’re still gonna carry out what we planned.”

Shionji and his two companions began snickering.

Ruri fixed them all with a fierce scowl. “Do you know something, Headmaster Shionji? What was that announcement—?”

“Ah, let me share some news with you. How about it, Saeki, Suoh?” Shionji said.

“Yes, I agree...”

“...Tch, you never grow up—do you, old man?”

No sooner had Wakaba and Tetsuga given their own thoughts than the three of them leaped forward.

At first, Mushiki was worried they were preparing to launch an attack—but no.

“...!”

A heartbeat later, Ruri shuddered in apparent realization.

...Right. The three teachers hadn't attempted to strike at Mushiki and the others, nor did they try to distract them from something else.

They had simply...left.

"They've turned tail...!" Ruri cried shrilly.

But then, before any of them could react—

"Fourth Substantiation: Gravity Palace."

With those words, the fourth substantiation of the Tower's headmaster, Gyousei Shionji, began to unfold.

A four-layered world crest appeared beneath his feet, his Tower uniform transforming into a solemn, pontifical-like vestment.

At the same time—

The space around him warped as though caught in a whirlpool—shifting into a huge cathedral formed out of darkness.

A fourth substantiation—the ultimate form of a substantiation technique.

It took tremendous training to go beyond one's first substantiation, *phenomena*, their second, *matter*, and their third, *assimilation*, to reach their fourth and highest of all, *domain*.

The ultimate form of magic, distorting the space around oneself to create *one's own landscape*.

In fact, this was the first time Mushiki had ever seen such a technique from anyone but Saika.

"Are you crazy?! What are you trying to do?! The rules only let us fight up to our second substantiations! Are you throwing the match?!" Touya cried, trapped within that cage of darkness.

The next moment, Shionji looked down at him with a sneer. "Are you still worried about something as petty as a demonstration battle? It behooves a true mage to quickly comprehend any situation they find themselves in," he said, raising his right hand into the air.

He was clutching a staff almost like a conductor's baton.

Then—

“Gah...?!”

“Ngh...!”

Mushiki and the others were thrown hard against the ground, laboring for breath.

It felt like they were being held down by an invisible hand—or to be more precise, as though their own physical weight had increased several times, far exceeding their strength, leaving them unable to stand upright.

Only Ruri was able to hold her ground, albeit only barely, keeping herself erect with the help of her Luminous Blade.

It didn't look like she would be able to move freely, but still she fixed Shionji in a glare, her eyes burning with her fighting spirit.

“...I don't know what's going on here, but I can see you're our enemy. As a Knight of the Garden...I'll take you into custody.”

“Very well. Go ahead and try,” Shionji said, pointing the tip of his staff—his second substantiation—up to the heavens. “I'm amazed you can stand upright in my fourth substantiation. You've truly earned the title of *knight*... But I wonder, can you dodge my Meteor Tact in that state?”

“...!”

Mushiki felt his chest tighten in apprehension as he recalled the blow that had hit them at the beginning of the match.

Ruri had been able to protect them in time on that occasion, but now she was being pinned down. If indeed Shionji had been responsible for that last attack, it wasn't difficult to imagine the consequences of a second attempt.

“Ruri...!” He wheezed under immense pressure.

But it was as if even his voice was held back by the immense gravity, with neither Shionji nor Ruri responding.

Slowly, Shionji began to lower his staff—and in the skylight of the cathedral,

countless stars began to glimmer.

...At the same time, a certain scene flashed in the back of Mushiki's mind.

A memory from several weeks ago—Ruri, having confronted *her*, sinking into a sea of blood.

"Ruri...!" he cried, gripping the hilt of his sword and following through with all his strength.

Of course, both his body and the blade were still within that cage of gravitational pressure—and far from delivering a blow to Shionji, he succeeded only in scratching the floor with his weapon's tip. His bones screamed in response to this extreme action, a bolt of intense pain shooting up his arm.

The attempt could hardly be described as anything other than futile. But still, he couldn't sit by and do nothing when faced with his younger sister's struggle.

The next moment—

"..."

Shionji's eyebrows twitched, his staff freezing in place.

Then, as though unable to believe his own eyes, he stared straight at Mushiki.

No, not Mushiki—at the crescent-shaped gash gouged into the cathedral's floor.

It was the smallest of scratches compared to the sheer scale of his fourth substantiation, but it was easy to see why the older man's gaze had been drawn to it.

In the darkness of this cathedral, only that small tear radiated a brilliant luminescence.

Yes. The tear was aglow—as though the light of the outside world was bleeding in.

"You damaged my fourth substantiation...? What in the world *is* that sword...?" Shionji furrowed his brow in suspicion but quickly attempted to regain his composure.

A mage's power stemmed from their strength of spirit. He understood that

dismay and worry could quickly decrease the potency of one's magic.

"It's a strange technique. But no more than a scratch. My Meteor Palace is indestructible," he muttered, glowering as he directed his staff—not at Ruri this time, but at Mushiki.

No doubt he had decided to eliminate him, with his unknown powers, first.

Ruri, having come to the same realization, caught her breath.

And yet—

"No. Even a small leak can sink a mighty ship. Or have you Tower fools grown senile in your old age?"

At that moment, a voice, somewhere, rang out.

"What...?" Shionji muttered in confusion.

A heartbeat later, the claws of a huge beast tore through the crescent-shaped gash in the ground, ripping it open as a creature resembling a wolf forced its way into the cathedral.

It was a beautiful animal, a red crest decorating its gleaming silver-white fur.

Shionji's eyes widened in alarm.

"...! Flaera's hound?!"

He attempted to redirect his staff toward the oncoming creature—but the wolf, unencumbered by the substantiation's gravitational pressure, bit hard into his neck.

"Gah...!"

A spray of blood burst forth as Shionji let out an anguished cry.

Immediately, his staff and vestments disappeared into a burst of light, the dark cathedral vanished, and they returned to their prior surroundings.

"...! Ha... Ha...!"

Mushiki coughed a few times as his lungs took in air; the force of gravity that had been pushing down on him was finally relenting.

"Mushiki! Are you okay?!" Ruri knelt down beside him, her face awash with

concern.

He did his best to respond with a smile, fighting to hold in the pain that still racked his body.

“Ah, yeah. Somehow... Are you all right, Ruri?”

“Yes...” She breathed out, glancing at his sword.

No doubt she was wondering the same thing—what on earth was that weapon?

But she probably understood that now wasn’t the time for such questions. Fixing him with a slight nod, she turned her attention back to Shionji.

The Tower’s headmaster was no longer floating in the air, but rather lying on his back, bleeding profusely from the neck. Even to the untrained eye, it was clear as day that the wound was most likely fatal.

“That wolf...,” Mushiki murmured—when a new voice sounded behind him in response.

“I don’t know which one of you it was, but good work making a tear in Shionji’s fourth substantiation.”

“Ms. Erulka...,” Ruri answered, turning around to face the speaker.

Indeed, a short distance away, straddling the back of a large wolf, with an active tattoo-like world crest decorating her body, was Erulka Flaera, a Knight of the Garden.

Or more accurately, in addition to her, there were also several other wolves nearby. No doubt—this was her second substantiation, Horkew. The other wolves were busy dealing with Wakaba and Tetsuga, both of whom were nowhere to be seen.

“Ms. Erulka, what’s going on here?” Ruri asked. “First Silvelle, then Headmaster Shionji and the others...”

“We don’t have the full picture yet,” Erulka answered with a stern look. “But one thing is certain—”

She stopped mid-sentence.

Shionji, without a doubt mortally wounded, raised his body with a sudden jerk.

“Wha—?”

Not only that, the wounds on his neck where the wolf’s fangs had torn through his flesh were bubbling away, healing before their very eyes. Mushiki couldn’t help but catch his breath at this extraordinary sight.

“You got me there, Erulka Flaera...”

“...Huh? It doesn’t look like I got you at all.”

Shionji glared viciously at her, but Erulka stared back at him through narrowed eyes, letting out an audible sniff.

“Ms. Erulka, is that...?”

“...Yes. He’s an Immortal. A wretched husk of a man trapped within Ouroboros’s endless cycle.”

“Ouroboros...?!” Ruri gasped in astonishment.

Erulka gave her a small nod. “If you see any other Tower students on campus, consider them enemies. I don’t know how they did it, but they must have somehow dragged Silvelle into all this... I’ll hold them off. You all, hurry—go and find Saika. If anyone can contain this mess, it’s her.”

“But won’t Lady Saika have already realized we’re facing a crisis? Isn’t the most urgent task to stop Headmaster Shionji? I’ll—”

“No. Your previous wounds haven’t yet fully healed. In your current state, it would be difficult for you to push past your third substantiation. You might be strong enough for a friendly match where the higher substantiation stages are restricted, but at his full power, Shionji is no small foe.”

“...”

Her previous wounds—Erulka was referring to the injuries Ruri had sustained at *her* hands last month. Probably because she lost consciousness during the incident, Ruri didn’t seem to remember who had maimed her so badly, but all the same, she had fought *her* by Mushiki’s side.

Ruri seemed to hesitate for a moment but soon nodded in acknowledgment.

“...I understand. Good luck.”

“Hmph. Just who do you think you’re talking to?” Erulka answered with a light shrug.

Mushiki and the others bowed deeply, whipped their aching bodies into action, and took off through the Garden.

“...Then again...”

After watching Ruri and the others quickly leave, Erulka climbed atop her wolf once more and turned her attention back to Shionji.

“...I wouldn’t have expected a man like you to succumb to this kind of ploy... But I also wouldn’t have expected you to give yourself willingly, either. Tell me—what happened? If you still have even the slightest shred of pride as a mage, resist the fetters of immortality.”

“Hmph...”

Shionji’s eyes narrowed as he activated his world crest beneath his feet, his staff reappearing in his hand, his vestments rematerializing.

“If you want to unseal my lips, then show me what you’ve got... If indeed *you* still have any self-worth as a mage,” he retorted, grinning.

Erulka’s lips twisted in response. “Very well. I’ll play your game, *boy*. Come at me.”



“Fuyajoh! Have you called Madam Witch yet?!” Touya yelled as the group ran through the Garden’s eastern precinct.

“I’ve been trying! But there’s no response!” Ruri shouted back.

In her right hand, she was still gripping her second substantiation, her Luminous Blade, while in her left, she was fumbling with her phone.

She had been trying to call Saika since a few minutes ago but had received no response. That, however, was hardly surprising—after all, Saika was already right beside her, albeit in the guise of Mushiki himself.

But there was no way Ruri could have known that.

As they bolted along the path, Honoka's expression gave way to worry. "Don't tell me they already got her...?" she asked.

"Impossible," Mushiki and Ruri replied in perfect harmony.

Their shared answer had been so sudden that Honoka could only react with a squeaky: "R-right... Of course not... But it's true Madam Witch hasn't taken any action of her own just yet. If she was to try bringing everything under control, there's no way she would let the enemy run wild like they are now. Maybe she's away—or immobilized for some reason..."

"...I see. Anyway, we need to get in touch with her as soon as—"

Touya stopped there as a projection of Silvelle's face appeared in front of them.

"Ohhh, what do we have here? Ruuru, Toutoh, Honoho. Did you manage to get away from Gyoukie and the others? Hmm... Everyone! The Garden's representatives are over here! Who wants to aim for a high score?"

The next moment, loud sirens started blaring as though to signal the presence of intruders.

"What...?!"

Mushiki and the others glanced around wide-eyed as two mages from the Tower leaped out, launching into their second substantiations—Takeru Matsuba, from the opposing team, and Shou Negishi, one of students who had been removed to give way to the teachers.

"Found them!"

"A hundred points for each contestant!"

The two cried out as though playing a game, the first boy's second substantiation coalescing into a hammer, and the other's, a mace.

"Tch..."

"Graphier!"

Touya and Honoka, at the head of the group, met the onslaught with their

own second substantiations, sparks of magical light erupting all around.

“Leave this to us!”

“You two...find Madam Witch!”

Touya and Honoka threw themselves into fighting their assailants.

Mushiki and Ruri exchanged glances, before giving the other two short nods.

“We’re counting on you!”

“Look after yourselves!”

With that, they dashed away—the sounds of fierce combat ringing out behind them.

That being said, as Silvelle was in control of the Garden’s security network, there was no way that they could run forever. Their only option was to let Saika handle this as soon as possible.

To that end, it was essential that they find Kuroe—so Mushiki could undergo a state conversion and receive instructions on how to proceed.

So as they ran down the street, he called out, “Ruri! Let’s split up!”

“Huh?! What are you saying?! You think I’m going to abandon you?!” she responded, immediately rejecting the suggestion.

“B-but we’ll be more likely to find her if we split up—”

“And if one of us gets taken out, we’ll be right back where we started!”

“...”

He fell silent, unable to respond as his shoulders drooped.

All the same, he couldn’t give up. The Garden’s very survival was at stake here. Clenching his fists, he resolved to appeal to Ruri once more.

But just before he could speak up, a ringtone sounded from his pocket—a notification from the social networking service Connect.

“...!”

As he grabbed his cell phone, his breath caught in his throat.

Yes. In this whole wide world, there was only one individual who knew how to contact him this way.

“Kuroe...”

As he had expected, she had sent the message.

His first message. He almost choked with tears of joy, but he managed to hold them in. Given the circumstances, it was clear this wasn't a complaint about work or an invitation to go out somewhere for a drink.

He hastily tapped the application's icon and read the message.

Ruri, watching on, furrowed her brow. “What are you doing? This is an emergency here! Leave it till later!”

Her reaction was understandable, seeing as she didn't have the full picture.

Mushiki stuffed the phone back into his pocket, then shouted in response, “Ruri! Instructions from Kuroe! She wants us to go to the central library's twentieth basement level!”

“The twentieth basement level... Huh?” she exclaimed, her eyes opening wide. “The sealed area... Ouroboros... It can't be...”

She muttered a few words under her breath but then quickly held her tongue and fixed him with a nod. “Follow me!”

“All right!”

She hit the ground running in a different direction, leaving him to take off as fast as he could so as not to get left behind.

“Ruri! What in the world is the Ouroboros...?!”

“...I've never seen it myself, but it's said to be one of the mythic-class annihilation factors Madam Witch defeated centuries ago. They say it can grant immortality, and those dragged into its influence become undying wraiths... I've heard it can even revive the dead.”

“Immortality...,” Mushiki repeated under his breath, the sight of Shionji pulling himself back up from the ground earlier flashing through his mind. “So they're all annihilation factors...right? There's probably a lot of people out there

who would be willing to chase after immortality, though...”

It was no exaggeration to say that immortality and an undying physical body had long ranked among humankind’s highest aspirations. There were countless stories from all corners of the world of individuals who had dedicated their lives to pursuing them.

“Yep, probably,” Ruri responded as though she already knew the answer to that question. “But this particular annihilation factor shows no restraint, and it doesn’t discriminate against any kind of creature or life. If left unchecked, it will take away old age, disease, and death from everything on earth—and even resurrect the deceased. And if they continue to reproduce and increase in number...”

“...!”

Mushiki’s breath caught in his throat.

“In the end, the world will be filled with the undying. They’ll be forever cannibalizing each other, forever being revived and reproducing, laying waste to the earth, the seas, the sky... The Ouroboros is an eternal serpent that derails the natural cycle of life—and one of the worst annihilation factors ever observed.”

“...I see.” Mushiki wheezed in understanding.

Certainly, he couldn’t find any word to describe such a world other than *hell*.

“...And part of that Ouroboros is meant to be sealed away beneath the central library. Its body is immortal, so not even Madam Witch was able to kill it properly.”

“So some things are beyond even Saika’s abilities...”

“But that just makes her more lovable.”

“Agreed.” Mushiki nodded without pause.

Ruri seemed momentarily at a loss from his reaction but must have concluded that she had misheard. “Anyway, part of the monster is sealed under the Garden. I don’t know how it relates to what’s happening now, but if Kuroe—Madam Witch’s attendant—wants us to go there, it has to be important.”

“Right, that makes sense... By the way, Ruri?”

“What?”

“I’m guessing regular students aren’t supposed to know all this. Is it okay, telling me?”

“...” Ruri responded with stony silence, then said, “You can keep it to yourself—or surrender your life. I’ll let you decide.”

“I—I can keep a secret...,” he murmured in a hurry.

Ruri turned her gaze back ahead. “There it is. The central library,” she said, indicating a huge structure at the edge of the eastern and the central precincts.

Mushiki had seen it several times while making his way across the Garden. Unlike most buildings on the campus, with their sleek, modern architecture, this one was built in an old-fashioned Western style.

After reaching the entrance, Ruri rattled the doorknob a few times, before—

“Hah!” She lashed out with a swing of her Luminous Blade, slicing the door clean in two.

“Ruri?!”

“If Silvelle is in control, there’s no way she would open the door without a fight. Let’s go!”

“O-okay...!”

He had been taken by surprise for a moment, but she was certainly right on that count. They wouldn’t be able to get through here without a fight, and they didn’t have time to worry about the small details.

With a final glance at the shattered pieces of the door, which looked to have been of considerable cultural value, he followed Ruri inside.

The two of them proceeded down the corridor to an area normally off-limits to students, where they found an elevator equipped only with a DOWN button. Beside the doors was what looked to be an authentication device—evidence that only a limited number of individuals were permitted to enter the lower levels.

Nonetheless—

“Yargh!”

Without the slightest hesitation, Ruri carved through the elevator doors with the blade of her second substantiation.

That, however, couldn't be helped. The lift was electronically controlled, so with Silvelle having changed sides, it was unlikely to work as intended. Even if it did open, they would likely end up trapped inside.

Mushiki's frantic thoughts had taken him this far when Ruri motioned to the damaged doors with her chin. “Let's go. Hold on.”

“Huh...? Like this?” he asked, grabbing hold of her arm.

Ruri scowled. “Do you want to die or something? Hold on properly.”

“Properly...,” he repeated, wrapping his arms around her body in a tight hug.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” she cried, punching him.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he let go. “You said to hold on...”

“From behind, you idiot! Like I'm giving you a piggyback ride!” she exclaimed, her face having turned scarlet.

This time, he placed a hand gingerly on her back so as not to suffer another blow.

“All right. Then hold on tightly. If you let go, you'll die.”

“Um... Ruri? What exactly are you—?”

But without even listening until the end, she swung her Luminous Blade once more and carved a neat hole in the floor of the elevator.

Without hesitating, she leaped into the darkness below.

Mushiki, holding tightly to her back, was naturally dragged down along with her.

“Ugh... Aaarrggghhh?!”

All of a sudden, it felt like he was floating. He strengthened his grip, fighting so as not to be shaken off.

Ruri, meanwhile, thrust her Luminous Blade into the wall with extreme poise, then used it to carefully adjust their speed.

A few seconds later—

Having reached the lowest level, they made a soft landing.

Only then did Mushiki let go.

“Ugh... I don’t think I’ll be afraid of roller coasters anymore...”

“What are you going on about? Here, this way,” Ruri said, urging him onward as she cut through the next set of elevator doors.

Mushiki clenched his fists to bring his trembling hands under control, then followed behind her.

Shortly after taking off down the corridor—they found *it*.

Arcane glyphs and magical letters covered the walls, and there was a metal gateway like what one might expect to find in a bank vault.

Then—

“What...?”

Mushiki’s eyes shot open at the sight of the individual who had arrived before them.

That was only natural. After all—

“Huuuh? Mushipi, is that you? Whoa, I wouldn’t have expected to find you *here*, you know? I thought it’d be Madam Witch or something. Ah, I get it! Maybe this is like the red string of fate? Hmm? Ta-daa!”

Clara Tokishima was there, breaking into a lighthearted chuckle.

“Clara...? What are you doing—?”

But before he could finish speaking, Ruri held her Luminous Blade in front of him in the form of a *naginata*—as if to stop him from proceeding any farther.

Or perhaps, he wondered, to protect him.

“...You haven’t forgotten what Ms. Erulka said, have you? Clara’s from the Tower.”

“...!”

At these words, a powerful tremor shook his body all the way to his fingertips.

He hadn't forgotten, and it wasn't as though he didn't understand what that warning implied.

For a moment, it had simply been unthinkable that the Clara before him, so spontaneous and easygoing, was anything other than the person whom he remembered.

To think that she had been transformed into an Immortal...

“Hmm? Are you on guard around me? That's so *sad*. And after we've already become so close...”

“That was all you!” Ruri shouted in anger.

After taking a second to gather her thoughts and clear her throat, she continued, “Clara...I've never really liked you. Yep. You keep clinging to Mushiki, and you're rude to Madam Witch. But I'm willing to put my grudges aside. So put that thing back.”

“Eeeh? You sounded pretty cool until halfway through...,” Clara said with a pout.

Ruri, still on high alert, braced herself with her Luminous Blade. “I know you're an Immortal. Sorry about this, but I'm not about to hold back.”

“No, no, no, you've got the wrong end of the stick or something. Clara here isn't immortal. You've made a mistake.”

“...Do you really think I'm going to fall for *that* after everything that's happened?” Ruri said with a glare, directing her blade at their foe.

As though responding to her fiery spirit, the stokes of the world crest above her head burned with a fierce light.

However—

“No, it's true. She isn't an Immortal.”

At that moment, a quiet voice came from behind them.

“...! Kuroe!” Mushiki called out.

Kuroe walked forward to stand by Ruri's side.

"Thank goodness. You're safe," Mushiki exclaimed.

"Yes. Somehow, or rather... It looks like someone was kind enough to open a hole to enter through. I'll have to send them a thank-you note along with the repair bill."

"..."

She was clearly joking, but Ruri nonetheless looked like he was on tenterhooks.

"...More importantly, Kuroe, what's going on? What do you mean, Clara isn't an Immortal?" she asked, as though hoping to change the subject.

"Immortals are those who have been trapped within the Ouroboros's endless cycle and deprived of death... I finally realized it after arriving here. She isn't an Immortal—she's something far more horrifying."

"..."

With this, Clara's lips twisted into a bewitching smile.

It was a terrifying expression, completely different from the impression she had exuded during their last few encounters. Mushiki felt his chest tighten in apprehension.

"Nyah-ha-ha... Far more horrifying? Well...you're right," she said, turning toward them and spreading her arms wide.

With that action, a dense magical energy began to spill out from her body.

"Ruri!" Kuroe called out, her skirt fluttering as she retrieved a hidden throwing dagger strapped to her thigh.

"I know!" Ruri responded, brandishing her Luminous Blade—capable of changing its shape at will—like a whip to hold their target in place.

"Gah!"

The next moment, an explosion burst with Clara at its center. Some kind of magic technique must have been inscribed on Kuroe's dagger. In the face of the intense shock wave, Mushiki could do little else but cower.

Yet—

“Hmm. You’re a merciless bunch, aren’t you? But I don’t *hate* it, you know, that ferocity you’ve got there,” sounded Clara’s voice behind the billowing smoke.

When the smoke finally cleared, the full picture was laid bare.

“...!”

Watching on, Mushiki couldn’t help but catch his breath unknowingly.

That was to be expected. A heart-shaped world crest had appeared by Clara’s lower abdomen, and at the same time, she donned clothes of vivid hues, her hands encaged in casket-like gauntlets each gripping a chainsaw.

“A third substantiation...?!” Ruri gasped, her shock reflected in her voice that was echoing throughout the basement.

“Ah-ha-ha! Surprised you, didn’t I? Mm-hmm, but I’m just getting started!”

Not a second later, a sound like a revving engine blasted out as the chainsaw clutched within her hands began to turn at high speed.

The same instant, she kicked off from the ground, rushing straight for Mushiki and the others.

“Ngh...!”

Ruri braced herself with her Luminous Blade to block the attack—and a dazzling exchange of blows began to play out as sparks of magical light erupted all around.

“Hah!”

“Ngh!”

Ruri’s Luminous Blade swelled in response to its user’s ferocity, forcing Clara to cease her assault.

“Mushiki!” Kuroe called out.

“Right!” he answered as he activated his own second substantiation, Hollow Edge.

At the same time, Kuroe unleashed another of her throwing daggers.

Clara turned her body lightly, jumping backward to dodge the attack.

“Whoa! That was a close one!”

Those movements, however, played right into their hands.

“...Nggghhh...!”

Ruri spun through the air, her blade swinging in a wide arc—then writhing as though imbued with a mind of its own as it sliced Clara’s head clean off.

“Huh...?”

Clara’s head stared back wide-eyed as it flew through the air, and red flowers of blood splattered the walls, floor, and ceiling of the underground facility.

Yet—

“What...?!” Ruri cried out in dismay.

Her shock was understandable. After all, Clara should have been dead, but there she was, her decapitated body reaching for its severed head and catching it moments before it could hit the ground.

“Whoa, now *that* was a surprise! I thought I was going to die just then!” she exclaimed as she threw the head back onto the stump of her neck with a loud plop.

Once it was back in its rightful position, a soft bubbling sound echoed out as the head reattached without leaving so much as a scar.

“Ah, that won’t do! I let down my guard, what with being unable to die and all. My defenses weren’t up to par, huh? I’d better work on that... You’ve got guts, little sister. That was pretty cool, you know? You didn’t even hesitate before slicing off my head right there.”

“...A mage is supposed to be resolute, no?”

“Phew. Yep, you’re cool, all right,” Clara said, letting out a small whistle as she shook her head to make sure it was properly reconnected. “Well, it’s not like I planned to lose or anything, but it’s three against one... I wonder if I’ve got enough stock left...”

With those words, she then bent forward and thrust her chainsaw into the ground as though to carve through the floor.

“Open the coffin!”

Then, as though pulled up by the rotations of the chainsaw’s blade, two coffins encrusted tastelessly in rhinestones came flying out of the ground behind her.

Then, from inside them both—

“...”

“...”

A pair of students wearing the Tower’s uniform strode out.

“What...?” Mushiki gasped.

“Is that...?” Ruri whispered.

Clara patted the two students on the back, before responding in a carefree tone, “Whaddaya think? My second substantiation, Endlesser, lured these guys in, offering to free them from old age, sickness, even death. Pretty awesome, huh?” she said with a hissing laugh.

At this sight, Ruri’s gaze became razor-sharp. “What are you talking about? Don’t tell me you killed all the students who came here from the Tower...? There were more than a hundred of them...”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say *killed*, but it’s kinda like that. With the exhibition match so close, I thought it was perfect timing, you know? It’s a bit of a stretch to recruit over a hundred new members, even if they are your classmates. But you guys were a great help. Usually, mages are only geared up to fight annihilation factors, so they’re pretty much defenseless against their friends.”

“Why...? Why would you do such a thing?!” Ruri demanded.

Clara’s lips twisted in a grin as she snapped her fingers. “Isn’t it obvious?”

In perfect response, a burst of static exploded as a silver-haired girl appeared before them—Silvelle, the Garden’s administrative AI.

“Silvelle...!”

“Way to go, Ruuru. You made your way straight here without letting the chaos of the melee above distract you. Congratulations. Excellent work, really,” she said in her usual gentle tone as she turned through the air to position herself behind Clara.

Then, wrapping an arm around Clara’s shoulder, she said, *“But you know? You mustn’t get in Clarin’s way... I’ve gone through a lot of trouble just to bring her here.”*

“...”

Ruri scowled. “So you were involved in all this, too, Silvelle? Why...? And since when...?”

“Well... That’s confidential. Just because I’m being nice to you doesn’t mean you should expect me to tell you *everything*.” Clara laughed, tilting her head to one side jokingly.

Faced with this irritating, playful attitude, Ruri felt veins begin to throb on her forehead, but she must have known there was nothing to be gained by getting into an argument here, and so she limited herself to fixing her in a fierce glower.

There was no mistaking that Clara’s magic was a clear breach of conduct. And it could probably be applied in unexpected ways. For all her technological sophistication, Silvelle was still an artificial intelligence and thus created by humans—if it came down to it, all one had to do was turn the engineers responsible for her maintenance into Immortals to usurp control of her.

Then again, perhaps it was also possible that if Clara recognized her as a living being, she could have influenced Silvelle directly... If that was the case, then they really were in over their heads.

Clara was still fixing Mushiki and the others with a strange stare when she nodded at Silvelle. “Okay, Sis. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Okay! ≡” the AI responded brightly as she twirled her index finger through the air.

Then, the console at the far end of the sealed area let out an electronic droning sound, and the heavy metal door at the end of the corridor began to

slide slowly open.

“...!”

Mushiki’s eyes widened in alarm when he spotted what lay on the other side—a huge heart contained within a transparent crystal.

There could be no doubt about it. That had to be part of the legendary Ouroboros.

“Mm-hmm! We finally meet. Now, let’s get started...,” Clara said, mesmerized as she reached for the organ.

“Don’t let her touch it!”

At that moment, Kuroe let out a loud scream—a shriek completely unlike her usual tone. That alone told Mushiki how serious the situation was.

Without a second’s delay, he and Ruri took off at full speed.

“Arrrggghhh!”

But moving to block their path were the two Tower students who had just emerged from their coffins, both activating their second substantiations.

“Tch!”

Ruri spun her blade to knock the first one to the ground—and at the same moment, the student approaching Mushiki received a dagger to the neck, no doubt Kuroe’s work.

“It’s your turn, Mushiki!”

“Right!”

As his opponent collapsed to the floor, Mushiki pushed past and made straight for Clara.

Watching him approach, Clara’s cheeks turned pink. “Ooh, Mushipi! You’re so passionate. I already knew you were cute, but I see now you also have a strong personality. But don’t you know? You can’t go around messing up a girl’s makeup!” she said, thrusting her chainsaw into the ground once again.

With a terrible grating noise, a huge casket emerged from below, the lid swinging open.

“Wha—?”

As he laid eyes on the figure leaping outward, his body stiffened.

That, however, wasn’t an unreasonable response.

After all, the *thing* that emerged wasn’t another Tower student, nor even a human, but rather—

A gelatinous monster quivering like a raging wave.

“A slime?!” He wheezed in shock.

Contrary to his voice, though, his mind was strangely calm as he took in this new opponent.

Yes. A calamity-grade annihilation factor, a slime. Its overall size called to mind the fused-mass slime that had attacked him during the last annihilation event.

In that moment, he suddenly remembered—it had been Clara who had defeated the monster.

Those killed by her second substantiation were deprived of death and, instead, became her servants.

If that was true, it all made sense. Come to think of it, she had used her chainsaw-like second substantiation back then as well.

“Mushiki!” Ruri’s voice called out from behind as he was jerked suddenly backward.

She must have adjusted her Luminous Blade to pull him to safety as the slime tore through the space where he had just been standing.

“Sorry! Thanks, Ruri!”

“Don’t worry about it! Just—”

But at that moment—

Drowning out the rest of her sentence, a horrendous crushing sound flooded the room, along with a burst of blinding light.

“...!”

A few seconds later, both sound and light subsided.

In the depths of the sealed area, there lay only shattered, miserable fragments of crystal—and in the midst of that wreckage, Clara stood smacking her lips in satisfaction.

“Ahhh...”

Her sigh was almost euphoric.

In appearance, she looked no different than before—but there was unmistakably something strange about her overall aura.

“...The heart... Where did it...?” Ruri wheezed, her face awash with horror.

Then, offering up a response, Kuroe furrowed her brow and said, “A fusion technique. I feared as much.”

“...! A fusion technique...?”

Mushiki’s throat tightened.

That term struck a chord in his memory... Right. Around a month ago, the dying Saika had used such a technique to merge his grievously wounded body with her own.

Which could only mean that Clara—

“Hmm? You’ve got a sharp eye, huh? You’re wasted as a maid, if you ask me,” Clara said playfully as she turned slowly around. “But bingo! Clara here is a hybrid, part human, part annihilation factor. Then again, I still only have the head and heart of one. Hee-hee.”

Right. Just like how the present *Mushiki* was a fusion of Mushiki Kuga and Saika Kuozaki—the individual before him was the product of both Clara Tokishima and the Ouroboros.

“...Are you saying it was all for *this*?” Ruri grunted as she braced herself, on high alert against their enemy’s second substantiation.

“Hmm?”

“The reason you got close to Mushiki and challenged Madam Witch to a duel—it was all so you could take the Ouroboros’s heart?”

Clara gave a weak shrug. “Ah... Don’t get me wrong. Yeah, I came to the Garden to grab this thing, but I *was* also into Mushipi.” She paused for a moment before continuing, “I mean, the boy who beat *her*...? Of course I’d have the hots for him. I wanted to get my hands on him, no matter what it took.”

“...!”

“...”

Mushiki’s voice caught in his throat, and Kuroe narrowed her eyes. Only Ruri furrowed her brow in suspicion.

When he stopped to think about it, that was the only logical explanation for how she knew what had happened. After all, she had Silvelle on her side.

...All of a sudden, Mushiki thought back to his first meeting with Clara.

Yes—when he had caught her falling from the roof of the central school building. Thinking back, she had indeed already known who he was.

He hadn’t given it much thought at the time, seeing how shortly afterward, Ruri had come running to tell him he had been selected for the exhibition match...

But where in the world could Clara have managed to hear the news first?

Knowing Ruri, she wouldn’t have wasted so much as a second between hearing of his selection and setting out to find him, nor was it likely that it would take her long to track him down within the confines of the Garden’s campus.

...Maybe Silvelle had fallen into Clara’s clutches even earlier than they thought.

Kuroe must have reached a similar conclusion, as she murmured under her breath, “I see... So you were behind Mushiki’s selection for the match.”

“Heh. I guess I’ve been caught. I wanted to see just how brave and valiant he was for myself, so I asked Silvelle for help. She had a rough record of what happened, but no details... But then, I had to come here during the match, so I didn’t get to see him in action anyway. Ah, my plans are always falling apart around me. But still, it’s kind of cute, don’tcha think? If I do say so myself.”

She stopped there to break out into a carefree laugh. “Hmm... Well, now... I’ve carried out my main goal, so it’s time for me to get outta here.”

With that, her eyes became like crescent moons as she smiled at Mushiki and the others. “You know, I’ve got an empty casket here just waiting to be filled.”

“...!”

Mushiki, Ruri, and Kuroe each tensed up at these words.

Clara, noticing their reaction, broke into a slight pout. “You don’t need to be scared; you know...? I’ll take you to a heaven where there’s no old age or death.”

The moment she’d finished speaking—

A large double-helical pattern appeared around her abdomen.

“...! A fourth substantiation...?!”

“Heh, I don’t have a lotta time here, so let’s wrap this up. This didn’t work all that well with just the head, but maybe now...”

She flashed them a fierce grin, her canines peeking between her lips as she crossed her left and right chainsaws in front of her.

“Fourth Substantiation: Reincarfect.”

No sooner had she intoned those words than—

Centering around her, cracks spread throughout, eroding the sight of the sealed area.

And then, the space around them shattered like glass.

Within an instant, the entire area had been transformed into Clara’s own domain.

“What...?”

As far as the eye could see, an abandoned cemetery extended out in every direction. The tombstones rising up from the pitch-black field were in vivid colors bright enough to make one’s eyes hurt, each of them modeled after farcical characters.

It almost looked like a cartoon made in bad taste—a chaotic space where comedy and horror had been artlessly blended together.

Nonetheless, this did seem to be the most appropriate form to give to the inside of Clara Tokishima's mind.

"Now, arise! Sleep time is over!" she called out, spreading her arms wide.

In perfect response, the ground began to rumble as countless human skeletons crawled out from the dirt.

"...?! Wha—?"

"Skeletons...?! No, wait..."

Both Mushiki and Ruri choked on their words, yet Clara shook her head.

"Oh, don't be so mean! You can't lump these guys together with those ghastly annihilation factors! Don't you have any respect for your esteemed seniors?"

"Seniors...? Y-you can't mean..." Ruri's eyes shot open in realization.

Clara broke into a broad grin as she nodded in confirmation. "That's right. My Reincarfect is calling everyone who has died here over the years back to life. And the Garden has been waging constant battle against annihilation factors for centuries, so I'm sure there must be a whole lotta mages slumbering down there..."

The next moment, she leaped up into the air, landing on top of a nearby tombstone.

Then, wearing a beguiling smirk, she shifted her gaze. "Hey, Mushipi. Won't you come with me? I really do love you, you know? If you're dead set against it, I'll make a special exception just for you—I'll let you stay mortal... So why don't we set out to build a new world together?"

She spoke in the sweetest tone imaginable, her head cocked to one side—but without even the slightest hesitation, Mushiki was quick to turn her down.

"I can't do that."

"Whaaat? Why not?"

"I could never betray Saika," he said flatly.

“...”

For a second, Clara's displeasure was plain to see, then she said, “Ah-ha-ha... I guess there's nothing we can do about it, then...”

Her face relaxed, she glanced across at the skeletons lined up around her and continued in her easygoing tone, “It's a shame everyone's missing their skin and flesh, but with only the head and heart, this is the best I can do... Still, I guess it'll be enough. Let's get this over with.”

“Okay, everyone!” she said, addressing the army of bones in a buoyant voice. “It's time to party! I'm hoping to get all three of them, but at the bare minimum, I want Mushipi. I'll lead him into the circle, so don't kill him. But! He'll be able to regenerate as much as he wants later, so I don't mind if you take an arm or leg from him!”

With that last warning, the skeletons that had emerged from the ground rattled their heads in agreement.

“All right, then. Let's go. *It's showtime!*”

With that declaration, the horde of skeletons lashed out at Mushiki and the others all at once.

“Ngh... Luminous Blade!”

With a swing of her second substantiation, Ruri took out a huge swathe of them.

Nonetheless, without pause, those bones soon reassembled themselves as the creatures resumed their march.

Individually, they weren't formidable opponents. The problem was their overwhelming numbers and their raw tenacity. At this rate, the skeletons *would* eventually push through.

“Mushiki!”

Kuroe must have come to the same realization, as she fixed him in her sights and called out to him.

“...!”

That signal was enough for him to understand her message.

Right. She was telling him that their only choice was to perform a state conversion here and now.

“But, Ruri—”

“We don’t have any other options. It’s our only way out of this predicament.”

“...! Got it!”

She was right, of course. There was no use dying here to protect their secret. So having made up his mind, he spun around to face Kuroe and receive a bolstered dose of magical energy.

“Whoa! I don’t know what you’re planning, but I don’t think so!”

Clara, however, had evidently caught sight of that movement, as she motioned with her chainsaws to the space between the two of them.

With that signal, the two Tower students reincarnated through her second substantiation lunged at them, wielding spear-shaped second substantiations.

“Ngh...!”

In terms of speed and accuracy, they were head and shoulders ahead of their skeletal allies. Caught off guard, and unable to defend or evade in time, Mushiki clenched his jaw as he prepared to meet their attack.

Yet—

“Watch out!”

The next moment, he was thrown backward as Kuroe’s voice sounded out.

Somehow, she had managed to save him.

But by the time he realized this—

“...?! Kuroe!”

One of the spears had pierced through her chest.

“Gah...”

Blood rolled down her chin as she let out a weak breath.

“Uggghhh!”

Mushiki’s eyes widened in horror, and he slashed the spear with Hollow Edge gripped tightly in his hand.

All at once, the spear-shaped second substantiation vanished in a flash of light. Spinning around, he grabbed Kuroe before she could fall to the ground and kicked the Tower students away.

“—!”

The two students rolled across the ground, letting out anguished cries.

Mushiki, however, paid them no attention, his voice strained as he clung to Kuroe while her life force bled away.

“Kuroe! Kuroe! Why...? Why would you—?”

“Please...calm down... Have you...forgotten? I’m not about to...let this kill me...”

“...!”

He jolted back slightly in surprise.

Right. Watching the spear cut through Kuroe had been so shocking that he had almost lost himself to despair, but she was ultimately a homunculus, an artificial body—if it ceased to function, her soul would simply be transferred to another vessel.

No doubt sensing that he had regained his composure, she continued with a small nod, “But...I won’t be able to...give you enough magical energy...like this... I hate to do this...but there’s no other way...”

Then, after revealing *it* in the smallest voice possible, she reached out to Mushiki’s lips, her fingers quivering.

“ ...”

“...I leave the rest to you... Look after my Garden for me...”

Having uttered those words, she said nothing more.

Ruri must have seen all this out of the corner of her eye, as she cried out while parrying the onslaught of skeletons, “K-Kuroe?! Mushiki, do you

remember any magic techniques for emergencies?! Hurry, you've got to stop the bleeding!"

"..."

Nonetheless, unable to keep his hands steady, he laid Kuroe's body on the ground and rose slowly to his feet.

Her body might only have been an artificial vessel, but he wasn't about to leave it unattended. Indeed, blood continued to seep from the cuts where she had bitten her lip.

But at the same time, he couldn't waste this opportunity, especially now that she had literally laid her life on the line to provide him with this chance.

"Ruri," he called out softly.

"What?! Don't give up! If we can get through this, I'm sure Ms. Erulka will be able to—"

"Can you kiss me?"

"...What?!" she exclaimed, evidently taken aback by the question.

But yes—that was Kuroe's final proposal for him.

With her final ounces of strength, she had imparted a certain power to his lips—the ability to absorb magical power from individuals other than herself.

"Wh-what are you talking about?! *Here?! Y-you* can't give up! I know you want something good to look back on at the end, but—"

Ruri, unaware of the intricacies of the situation, shouted back in alarm, her cheeks having turned bright red. The fact that she was still able to wield her *naginata* without so much as stopping was a testament to her skill as a knight.

"Please, Ruri."

"B-but I—"

"You're all I've got, Ruri."

"...! E-even so..."

"I know I'm being unreasonable here. I know you don't want to. But—"

“I—I didn’t say anything about not wanting to!”

She continued to brandish her Luminous Blade, her face having turned as bright as a ripe tomato. Far from losing her concentration, this discussion had only made her even more powerful. Her world crest hovering above her head was shining like never before.

“Whoa... So I was right. *That’s* what you’re fighting over? Brothers and sisters, forbidden love...?” Clara said, watching on in all seriousness. “But I can’t let this go unnoticed! You might be Mushipi’s dear sister, but I’ll never let you have him!”

With that, she raised her hand into the air—directing countless waves of skeletons to rush in and attack.

“Ngh...?! M-Mushiki!”

“Ruri...!”

With so many fresh skeletons raging forward, Ruri was driven off far away.

That wasn’t all. Following shortly after the swarm of skeletons was Clara, her twin chainsaws letting out a vicious whine.

“Come on, Mushipi! It’s time to dance!”

“Guh...!”

He clenched his jaw in frustration as he glared at his approaching opponent.

She clearly intended to decide this bout once and for all. At this rate, he risked being dragged into her endless cycle and transformed into an Immortal.

And that would mean Saika, with whom he shared a body, would likewise fall under Clara’s control.

“...I won’t let that happen!”

Gripping the hilt of his second substantiation, he adopted a defensive stance, ready to intercept his attacker.

“Heh! That’s the spirit!” She must have noticed his movements, as her lips curled into an amused smile.

“Good! Let Clara here give you a gentle hug!” she screamed, swinging her

chainsaw as it let out a high-pitched roar.

The attack was fast but, at the same time, littered with openings.

Clearly, she had let her guard down.

Most likely, such recklessness came part and parcel with possessing an undying body. The overwhelming advantage that immortality offered, no matter the severity of any blow that she sustained, had no doubt exacerbated her hedonistic personality and incapacitated her sense of caution.

And those few shortcomings created Mushiki's only remaining path to victory.

"Auuuggghhh!"

He lashed out with his Hollow Edge, delivering a strike with the flat of his sword, then pointed the tip of the blade at Clara.

It was faint, but he envisioned Saika's smile.

Such an image seemed quite out of place in the midst of battle.

But Mushiki was certain.

For him to wield his own magic here, this would be the most effective mental image.

Because his second substantiation had been born within this shared body, guided by Saika's voice, its purpose being to protect her!

"Hollow Edge!"

Above his head, his world crest shone brilliantly, his transparent blade carving through the air.

As though being pulled forward, his second substantiation rushed straight for Clara.

"Endless!"

The same moment, Clara swung her chainsaws down from overhead, as though hoping to cut him through diagonally from either side.

And that was the focal point—his Hollow Edge aimed for the area where the two chainsaws crossed.

The twin chainsaws let out earsplitting roars as Clara followed through with a precarious swing. Under normal circumstances, Mushiki's attack would have been stopped, and he would have been done for.

But—

“...Heh?”

The moment his blade made contact with her Endlesser—cracks rippled through the chainsaws, and without a sound, they disintegrated.

“—!”

Watching on, he tightened the grip on his blade.

To be perfectly honest, that had been a huge gamble just then.

After all, he himself had yet to fully grasp the power of his second substantiation.

Most mages tended to have an instinctive sense of their substantiations the moment they succeeded in manifesting them, but Mushiki had only been half conscious and achieved it with the help of the physical memories that came with Saika's body. So he remained somewhat imperfect in that regard.

Nonetheless, through his battle against *her*, and his later fights with Tetsuga and Shionji, he had realized something about his blade.

To one degree or another, his Hollow Edge had successfully damaged the substantiations of every opponent whom he had faced thus far.

He still didn't know what exactly that meant, nor did he have any idea how it worked.

But if his assumption was correct...

Then his sword ought to be able to destroy Clara's second substantiation, too.

And as expected, his Hollow Edge did indeed shatter her Endlesser.

However—

“...?!”

His breath caught in his throat.

The moment Clara's Endlesser vanished, his Hollow Edge exploded in a burst of light.

They took each other out simultaneously...

No, he corrected himself. Maybe he had just exhausted his magical energy. He had successfully activated his second substantiation, but he had wielded it for too long.

"Nyah... Hah..."

Clara must have realized that, too. Though looking stunned at first, she soon broke out into a fresh grin.

Yes. As Tetsuga had demonstrated earlier, a mage could reactivate a substantiation so long as their magical energy wasn't depleted.

"You startled me there, Mushipi! But it looks like you're at your limit," she said, the world crest at her lower abdomen materializing once again.

"..."

As he had feared, Clara's reserves of magic had yet to run out. It wouldn't be long before she manifested her Endlesser and set out to attack again.

Now that he had lost his own second substantiation, he would be unable to stop her.

They were close enough that they could almost touch one another—and at that moment, his mind gave way to despair.

However...

"Ah," he murmured in sudden realization.

Only then did he think of it.

He had almost given up hope, but he still had one option left.

As far as he was concerned, it was the worst possible path to survival. He already felt struck by guilt at having discovered this potential solution to his predicament.

Nonetheless...

“...I leave the rest to you... Look after my Garden...”

At that moment, Kuroe’s last words echoed in his mind, and he clenched his jaw.

Ah, he positively hated it—this innocent naïveté of his.

It was trivial, hardly worth considering. Even at this late hour, even though he understood it all perfectly at an intellectual level, still, he wasn’t prepared to carry it out.

Who was it standing before him? An annihilation factor who had rendered more than a hundred mages of the Tower into Immortals, who had wounded Ruri and Kuroe and now intended to destroy the entire Garden.

And what exactly had *he* sworn?

To *her*, what was it that *he* had promised...?

To protect Saika—and to save the world by her side.

That wasn’t going to be an easy path.

There was no time to hesitate, not even for a second...!

“...!”

It was an instant decision. Before Clara could remanifest her Endless, he had already stepped toward her.

“Eh?”

Then, while she stood stunned by this sudden movement, he approached her face...

...and pressed his lips against hers.

“...?! ”

Clara’s eyes spun around in circles at the unexpected kiss.

Here he was kissing a woman other than Kuroe. The immoral touch of another woman filled him with unbearable self-loathing.

But now...the necessary *condition* had been fulfilled.

If Saika asked it of him, he was willing to return her body to her even if it cost

him his life—and with that firm resolution, the magic technique implanted on his lips activated.

The next moment—

He felt an enormous swell of magical energy rising up inside him.

“...?! ...!”

Without any warning, Mushiki leaned in to kiss her...and Clara’s mind went blank.



Huh? Why? So suddenly? Ah, Mushiki's kissing me...

Her heart, which she had only just regained, pounded in her chest as a potent mix of euphoria and confusion flooded her mind.

On the cusp of desperation, had Mushiki finally decided to accept his fate? If that was the case, then she had a responsibility to accept him graciously. After all, it was he who had defeated her despised enemy, he who had freed her from her...

However—

“...Hah...”

The next moment, Clara let out an astonished gasp.

But that was to be expected.

After all, before her very eyes, Mushiki's body began to glow with a faint light—before transforming into something else.

Long, radiant hair. A perfectly proportioned face. And in the center of it all, a pair of eyes aglow in every color imaginable.

Yes. There was no way that she, who had merged with the Ouroboros, could have mistaken her.

This was none other than—

“Saika...Kuozaiki...!”

The detestable woman who had once defeated the Ouroboros before dismembering it into twenty-four separate pieces.

“Clara.” Saika's lips moved quietly.

But something about her voice struck her as different from the Saika whom she remembered.

“You've robbed the right of death from those of the Tower, you've hurt Kuroe and Ruri, and now you're trying to destroy Saika's precious Garden... But I won't let you.”

“...?!”

Chaos flooded her brain. That voice was unmistakably Saika's, but her overall tone and atmosphere were that of her beloved Mushipi.

"...Maybe you have your reasons. Maybe this all seems sensible from your viewpoint... But if your plan is to usurp what matters most to Saika..." She paused there, before continuing with silent determination, "...I'm going to stop you—by any means necessary."

With those words, Saika slowly lowered her gaze—once more revealing her eyes shining in a resplendence of color.

At that moment, Clara was struck with a sense of absolute certainty. This was, without a doubt, a completely different Saika Kuozaki from the one whom she had known.

Then, with a dauntless grin, Saika's mouth opened once more. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid Mushiki can't go out with you. That kiss just now was meant as a farewell. Give him up."

So came the words of rejection.

The next moment, a four-layered world crest unfolded over Saika's head almost like a broad witch's hat.

"The creation of all things," he intoned.

A beautiful voice emanated from Mushiki—sounding simultaneously of his and someone else's.

Saika Kuozaki. Those words had been spoken by the most powerful mage in the world, the Witch of Resplendent Color.

In fact, though he could feel a deep trembling in his throat, Mushiki himself uttered that phrase only half aware.

"Heaven and earth alike reside in the palm of my hand."

A fantastic, variegated stream of light coursed through his field of vision.

Such was the light of Saika's magic—the glow of the four-layered world crest that hovered above his head.

That light engulfed the space around them, warping it anew.

Painting over the world itself.

Mushiki, having undergone a state conversion into Saika Kuozaki, manifested her fourth substantiation as a sense of utmost omnipotence coursed through his body.

“Pledge obedience... For I will make of you my bride.”

With those words, the dimly lit cemetery was overwritten by an azure-blue sky stretching outward without end.

Then, from both above and below, more skyscraper-like edifices than the eye could count loomed over Clara like the jaw of some immense beast.

This was Saika Kuozaki’s fourth substantiation—*this* was why she was regarded as the strongest mage.

A labyrinth of extremes, capable of slaughtering anything caught within.

“—.”

Clara, half stunned, surrendered herself to the fourth substantiation.

As pallid as a ghost, she glanced toward Mushiki, now in the guise of Saika. “Ah, I get it,” she murmured, having figured it all out. “So that’s it. Incredible. So you and Mushipi are already together... I guess there was never any room for me, huh?”

Such were Clara’s final words.

The next moment, like a piece of rubbish caught helplessly in the wind, her figure was swallowed up by a swarm of collapsing structures.



Chapter 6

◀ Clara the Betrayer ▶

“Ruri, are you okay?”

“...Yes. I don’t know how, though.”

Shortly after Saika’s fourth substantiation engulfed everything and vanquished Clara, Mushiki ran over to Ruri, in a corner of the basement.

Incidentally, he had returned to his Mushiki mode. Perhaps there was something irregular about absorbing magical energy from anyone other than Kuroe, as no sooner had he deactivated his fourth substantiation than he reverted to his original form. Surely it couldn’t be only Saika’s body that most excited him... Right?

In any event, now that the sealed area had been returned to normal, the only figures present were Clara, who was lying on the ground battered and bruised, Ruri, and him. Given that Clara had an Immortal’s body, she couldn’t be dead and had no doubt merely lost consciousness. Nonetheless, it would be best to restrain her while they still could.

At that moment, Ruri’s expression showed deep regret. “Kuroe... If I... If I had only been in top condition...”

“...It’s not your fault, Ruri. Don’t blame yourself,” Mushiki said, trying to console her.

“But I—”

“Did you call me?”

But before she could finish her sentence, Kuroe poked her head out from behind Mushiki.

“Wh-whaaat?!” Ruri cried out in alarm.

Kuroe, however, seemed utterly unperturbed, tilting her head quizzically. “Oh, are you all right, Knight Fuyajoh?”

“H-h-how are you still alive?! N-no way, don’t tell me you’re an Immortal, too...?!”

“Who are you calling an Immortal?” she responded with a slight pout.

Of course she wasn’t. Standing before them now was a fresh homunculus that her soul had just been transferred into. Her clothes were covered in bloodstains, but her skin seemed unmarred. The fallen artificial body must have been recovered somehow or hidden away in the shadows.

But Ruri, unaware of all this, pointed a finger at Kuroe in panic.

“But you were one hundred percent dead! Didn’t that spear go right through your chest?!”

“You were busy fighting, so you must have misread the situation. The wound wasn’t particularly deep, in fact.”

“R-really...?”

Ruri still looked suspicious, but given that Kuroe herself seemed so full of life, she must have decided to take that explanation as the truth. A moment later, she accepted the other young woman’s proffered hand as she rose to her feet.

After helping her up, Kuroe gave Mushiki and Ruri a short nod.

“More importantly, you did well today, Knight Fuyajoh. You too, Mushiki. It’s no overstatement to say that the Garden was saved through your efforts.”

“...You’re exaggerating. Clara had us at her mercy the whole time. If Madam Witch hadn’t shown up at the end...” Ruri paused there, frowning as though suddenly remembering something, before turning her gaze to Mushiki.

“ ...”

“Ruri?”

“Ah... No. It’s nothing. But where did Madam Witch go? I was surrounded by skeletons, so I couldn’t see clearly... But that fourth substantiation *was* hers,

right?”

“Ah... Yeah. She must have had something else to see to after neutralizing Clara,” Mushiki lied.

Ruri knit her brows. “So she showed up at the last minute, infiltrated Clara’s fourth substantiation from the outside, defeated her in the blink of an eye, and then left without even saying anything?”

“W-well...”

He had to admit, it did all seem a little too good to be true. He felt himself breaking out into a nervous sweat, when—

“That’s just too cool...”

Ruri held Saika in high regard, and that must have been enough to blow away any sense of incongruity or discomfort she felt. Mushiki, still slightly on edge, breathed a sigh of relief.

Ruri likewise let out a light exhale as she regained her composure, before turning to face him. “I’m glad you’re all right... Really, when Kuroe got hurt, I was at a complete loss...”

She paused, her cheeks turning bright red.

“Ruri? What’s wrong? Your face...”

“N-no, it’s nothing... Um, it’s just when Kuroe collapsed, I...”

“Yes...?”

At that moment, his shoulders trembled as he suddenly recalled what happened.

Right. He had asked Ruri to kiss him, though she hadn’t granted that request.

As soon as he remembered this, Mushiki fell to his knees, propped his hands on the ground, and bowed as deeply as he could.

“I’m sorry!”

“Eh... Eh?! ”

The sudden apology must have taken her by surprise as Ruri practically

flinched in response. Mushiki, however, paid that no heed and remained prostrate before her.

“It couldn’t be helped at the time... But I’m still really sorry for saying that, without considering your thoughts, Ruri.”

“You don’t need to apologize... But it’s not like I don’t understand your feelings or anything...,” she answered.

During the course of this exchange, a chime sounded as the elevator arrived.

After a short moment, Erulka, still straddling one of her summoned wolves, appeared through the doors. She herself must have been involved in some fierce battle, as the hem of her lab coat was scorched black.

“Hmm, it looks like you’ve both had a hard time of it, too. But you must have managed to work it out.”

“Ms. Erulka...”

Ruri pulled herself together to stand up straight as their visitor approached.

“I’m glad to see you’re safe. What happened to Headmaster Shionji?”

“I managed to restrain him, so others can keep him under tabs for now. We’ve detained the students from the Tower, too, for the most part, and physically cut Silvelle’s servers off from the network... I’m not looking forward to evaluating the damage, though,” Erulka said as her gaze fell on Clara farther inside the sealed area. “Oh? Was she the mastermind behind all this?”

“Yes... She seems to have fused herself with the mythic-class annihilation factor, the Ouroboros...”

“...Why in the world would she do something so stupid? The fool,” Erulka said with a grimace as she stepped down from the wolf’s back and approached the fallen Clara.

Then, as she reached out to touch her—her eyebrows twitched.

“What on earth...?”

“...? Is something wrong?” Mushiki asked.

Erulka grabbed Clara by her clothing to turn her over and laid her on her back.

Then, placing a hand on her neck, she said with a shudder, “She’s dead.”

“Eh...?”

Both Mushiki and Ruri widened their eyes and stared in shock.



Outside the grounds of Void’s Garden, a strange *something* was crawling through a deserted field.

It was a gelatinous object with an eyeball-like sphere fixed in its center—it couldn’t have been any bigger than twenty centimeters in length.

Eventually, the creature came to a stop at a certain place, its body quivering as it spat out the eyeball.

A brief moment later, the surface of the eyeball began to bubble and swell as it rapidly expanded in size.

An optic nerve began to sprout from the back of the orb, new flesh came into being, blood flowed, and bones took shape—then smooth skin formed, from which hair began to sprout.

Within a few minutes, a girl was born—without so much as a thread of clothing.

No. Not *born*. Perhaps *reborn* would be a more appropriate term.

Yes. Having anticipated defeat, Clara had entrusted a part of herself to a piece of slime that she let escape from the Garden.

“...Phew...”

Now back in human form, she threw herself down on the ground, stretching her arms and legs as she let out a deep breath.

“That’s Saika Kuozaki for you. I guess I’ll need more than the head and heart to beat her, huh?”

This was a clear admission of defeat—and yet there wasn’t the slightest hint of disappointment or pessimism in her voice.

But why should there be? After all, she had already achieved her initial objectives.

The first was to send Immortals into the Garden so she could capitalize on the chaos to seize the Ouroboros's heart.

The second was to use the Garden's administrative AI to obtain information on the whereabouts of the remaining twenty-two pieces.

And the third—

“Welp, this harvest produced a good yield, all right...”

Her lips twisted into a grin as she sat up and brought her hand to her face to whistle through her fingers.

Then, as though summoned, a winged smartphone flew down before her.

“Now, then... Everyone in the Garden probably knows all about me by now... I s'pose I might as well go with something flashy then, huh? I *am* naked, though... Heh, I guess I can just shoot from the shoulders up. Let's treat this as fan service!”

Flicking through the screen on her smartphone, she started a fresh MagiTube live stream.

“Hiya there! And we're back—it's Clara Channel Time!

“Are you having a *ca-ra*zy day, my Claramates?

“So that's how it is. We're streaming at a different time than usual today. But you know how it is with your good friend Clara, right? These things are bound to happen.”



“This is getting nowhere. Anyway, here's your good friend Clara's top three dreams for the future!

“Number three! To get more subscribers for my channel!

“Number two! To fall in love with a guy and become a couple!”

“ ... ”

With unbelieving eyes, Mushiki found himself watching a certain MagiTube live stream.

Already taken aback by news of Clara's death, he was now even more

stunned to hear from the grapevine that she was presently airing a new live video.

“And number one...”

She was naked, bursting with excitement, and flashing a venomous smile at the camera.

“To collect all the remaining pieces of my body, crush that witch from the Garden, and get my hands on a new world!”

“...!”

Mushiki and everyone around him suddenly frowned at this abrupt declaration.

It had come out of nowhere, and the comments below the video were filled with displays of raw astonishment. Clara, her eyes moving left and right as she perused her viewers’ reactions, brought her thumb to her neck in a throat-cutting gesture.

“My name is Ouroboros—a mythical annihilation factor once defeated by your witch.

“I’m being perfectly serious. Just you wait, Mushipi. Clara here ain’t about to give you up.

“But don’t worry, I’m not about to expose you. Sharing secrets is all part of having a special type of relationship, right? Heh-heh.

“All right, that’s it for today. Clara out!”

With that, the live stream came to an abrupt end.

Ruri sat there in stunned silence for a moment, before letting out an indignant sigh. “Always joking around. What’s her problem?”

“Should we take that as a declaration of war?” Kuroe wondered aloud. “We should mobilize a search team to locate her immediately. It’s too dangerous to let her run loose.”

“Very well... I’ll take part. You’ll need a wolf’s nose if you’re to sniff her out. Ruri should come with us, too,” Erulka said, climbing once more onto her wolf’s

back.

Ruri gave her a nod as she took a seat behind her. “Yes. I’ll be the one to—”

“No, we’ll treat your injuries first. What’s your current condition?”

“Ngh...”

Ruri squeezed her lips firmly shut at this order.

Erulka must have taken her silence as a sign of acceptance, as she fixed her with a nod. “Good... In that case, we’ll go on ahead. Kuroe, I’ll arrange a team to seal it away, so stay here for the time being to keep an eye on the corpse. We’re dealing with the Ouroboros, so there’s no telling what it might do.”

“Leave it to me...,” she replied. “I need to have a discussion with Mushiki, in any event.”

With that, Erulka led her wolf back the way they had entered.

“...”

Ruri was mulling over her thoughts as she clung to Erulka’s back atop her summoned wolf. How on earth did Clara manage to escape? How spineless, how cowardly could she be? And was Kuroe’s wound *really* nonfatal? So many stray thoughts and questions kept spinning around inside her head.

But one of them occupied her mind the most.

Yes. The moment Clara attacked Mushiki, Ruri had seen something, albeit only for the briefest of moments, behind the throng of skeletons closing in on her.

Mushiki had kissed Clara... And somehow, he looked like he’d been *replaced* with Saika.

“...Ms. Erulka...”

“...Hmm? What is it?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

Indeed, it was simply too absurd. This could have been no more than a simple misunderstanding brought about by the commotion of Clara’s fourth substantiation unfolding. She might also just have been seeing things.

With a shake of her head to clear her mind, she tightened her grip around Erulka's waist.

"Mushiki."

After seeing Erulka and Ruri off, he and Kuroe were left alone in the sealed area beneath the library (though strictly speaking, Clara's corpse was still there, too).

"Thank you again," Kuroe said. "You did well. I'm glad you understood my message and were able to stop her."

"Yes. But I..."

He stopped, a look of regret washing over his countenance.

Kuroe shook her head. "It wasn't your fault that she escaped... It *is* alarming that she seems to have realized your secret, though. But at least she doesn't seem intent on divulging it for the time being. So long as we catch her before she shares it with anyone, we should be okay."

"No... Well, yes. I guess there's that, too."

"...?" Kuroe tilted her head.

"I...", Mushiki began to say with a heavy heart, fighting to keep his hands steady. "I know it couldn't be helped... But I kissed...another woman... Other than you..."

"..." Kuroe stared back with a look of amazement. "That's what you were brooding over? Don't worry about it. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have been able to replenish your magic. You made the right decision."

"But—," he began, only to be cut off as she gave an exasperated shrug.

"Mushiki. You said you would save both the world and me, yes? Was that promise a lie?" Kuroe asked in Saika's voice.

He shrank back at these words. "...! No, I—"

"The path you've chosen cannot be traversed without resolve and determination. If you can defeat an enemy as strong as that using no more than your lips, then why hesitate? Frankly, I'm glad you didn't leave everything to

chance at the last minute.”

“...”

He fell silent, when Kuroe continued teasingly, “Or does kissing someone else make you question your feelings for me?”

“Impossible,” came his immediate response.

Kuroe was startled for a moment, before letting out an amused laugh. “In that case, what’s the problem? If something’s necessary, don’t hesitate. Just come back to me at the end. That’s all that matters.”

“...Right.” He nodded, clenching his fists as he affirmed his strength of will.

But at that moment, a new question suddenly came to mind. By the time he knew what he was doing, he was already asking it aloud. “So that’s it... Has Saika been living her life by that rule all this time?”

“Hmm?” Kuroe slightly tilted her head, watching him through expressionless—though seemingly amused—eyes. “Is that question meant to be your use of a certain right?”

“Ah...”

His eyes widened in surprise. Right, he had won the right to have her answer one question of his during their training the other day—but in the end, he had been so busy debating what he should ask that he hadn’t had a chance to use it.

He paused there, swallowing deeply before clearing his throat—and finally gave her a hesitant nod.

With a sudden jerk, Kuroe pushed Mushiki up against the wall.

“Eh? U-um...”

“We’ll need to turn you back into Saika to clean up this whole affair, no? Let me help you undergo a state conversion.”

With those words, she slowly drew nearer to his face—

“...You’re the first person I’ve ever kissed.”

She said in a whisper just before their lips touched.

“ ... ”

The next moment, Mushiki’s response was smothered by the touch of Kuroe’s mouth pressing against his own.

◀ Afterword ▶

Hiya there! It's Koushi Channel Time!

So there we have it, Volume 2 of *King's Proposal: The Crested Ibis Demon*. How was it? I hope you enjoyed it.

We have another wonderful piece of cover artwork this time around. Yep...a pretty incredible character design. I thought it would be a bit bold to use a new character who's making her first appearance, but being miserly doesn't do anyone any favors, and she *is* one of my favorites, so we decided to introduce her front and center on the cover.

By the way, her name is Clara Tokishima. I know what you're thinking —*Really?*

I like to put little hints in my character's names, like how Saika's is written with the kanji *sai* for *multicolored* and *ka* for *calamity* or *disaster*. In the same way, Clara's is composed of *kura* for *devour* and *ra* for *good*, and the *toki* in her last name means "crested ibis." You could probably say these kinds of names only really work for fictional characters. That being said, if they're too unique, they can end up leaving too strong an impression, so I try to keep them relatively simple when possible.

One example of a slightly peculiar pronunciation would probably be Kuroe's name, written with the characters *kuro* for *black* and *e* for *garment*. It seemed natural to me, as the author, that this is supposed to be pronounced similar to the French name *Chloe*, but I wonder if the written form fully conveys that to readers... In any event, I'm making a note of it here.

Once again, many people have helped bring this title to publication.

To my illustrator, Tsunako. Thank you as always for your superb illustrations.

I'm sure Clara was a more difficult character to draw than most, but you pulled it off with incredible results. Hats off to your ability to bring her to life.

To the designer, Kusano. You've produced another cool cover this time around. Given how we had a huge number one on the cover of the first volume, I can breathe a sigh of relief now that the second book is out, too.

To my editor, I'm indebted to you as always. I'll make steadier progress next time, I promise...! (My resolution is as firm as that of the Four Heavenly Kings who serve Almighty Śakra!)

To all those in the editorial staff and involved in sales, publishing, and distribution, along with everyone who picked up this book and gave it a chance, I'm so grateful that I could offer you all bouquets of flowers.

Let's talk again in the third volume of *King's Proposal*.

March 2022, Koushi Tachibana

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